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When God Dies: Deconversion from Theism as Analogous to the Experience of Death

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WHEN GOD DIES: DECONVERSION FROM THEISM AS ANALOGOUS TO THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH

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If you can recognize God, and you have learned to relate to him as existing in the world – if this God is real to you – you should feel the feelings that should come from such a relationship.

But if God can show up, he can also go away.

T.M. Luhrmann,
When God Talks Back
pp. 101, 281

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In this thesis, I explore the psychological and experiential aspects of the shift from a supernatural theistic worldview (specifically born-again Christianity) to a philosophically naturalistic and atheistic worldview in the context of the religious landscape in the U.S. I posit that certain features of this transition, which is known as "deconversion," can be thought of as potentially analogous, both psychologically and subjectively, to the experience of another's death as an objective environmental change. I provide anthropological and psychological evidence that believers often experience the God of born-again Christianity as an independently existing and active agent in the world. The similarities between human relationships and God relationships provide the foundation for the claim that loss of these relationships potentially constitute similar experiences, respectively. Both shifts (deconversion and death) share a number of similarities. For example, they both feature a reduction in the number of entities that are believed perceived as having minds (i.e., theory of mind determinations). Also, both shifts require a re-understanding of purpose and meaning in the world (i.e., teleological reasoning). I explore each of these shifts in detail. Finally, I show that the interpretation of the deconversion experience as analogous to the experience of death has implications for the public dialogue between Christians and atheists.

Chapter I: What's It Like?

Having lived most of my life in the Christian fold, I recognize I cannot ask you simply to jettison your faith as if it were a common pair of dirty trousers. My own transition was long and painful, rather more like ripping off my very skin than shedding my trousers.

- Kenneth Daniels,
former born-again Christian missionary

What is it like to experience a shift in one's orientation toward the world? What is it like to believe fundamentally different ideas today about the nature of reality than you did in the past? Specifically, what is it like to experience the loss of religious belief? For an increasing number of people in the United States, such a worldview shift is a reality (Newport, "No Religious Identity") and many of those who have denied previous religious affiliations or lost previously held religious faith have lost the belief in the God of Christianity specifically.[1] This is understandable since Christianity is the religion of a large majority of the U.S. population (Newport, "Christianity Remains Dominant") and given the recent rise in atheism and agnosticism, respectively (WIN-Gallup International; Kosmin & Keysar). Such a worldview shift is unique to every individual and is often deeply transformative, affecting how individuals experience themselves and the world.

What does it mean for someone to lose belief in God? How does such an alteration in belief about the world play out in the lives of Americans in the early 21st century? Given the political and social relevance of the concept of God, such questions are as pressing as they have ever been, if not more so. Conversations at the societal level that revolve around religion in the United States, political issues especially, often are difficult to separate from beliefs about the concept of the God of Christianity. On the

[1] "The biggest gains due to change in religious affiliation have been among those who say are not affiliated with any particular faith" (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life).

individual level, belief in God often is conceptually related to the understanding of one's social environment, as well as to the very existence of meaning and purpose in the world more broadly. Also, such propositional beliefs about the world inform the determination of appropriate (and inappropriate) courses of action. That is to say, the question of God's existence has direct and indirect philosophical, experiential, and practical consequences. These consequences have become increasingly salient in light of the recent and continuing shift away from religiosity in the U.S. population.

Recent formal dialogue between theists and atheists has commonly occurred in polemical texts (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?*) or debate-style exchanges usually held in universities, public venues or religious meeting places. In such exchanges, atheistic thinkers typically argue for their position by citing conflicts between modern scientific understanding and the hypothesis of God, while theists (usually Christian) often argue for what they see as design in the universe and the threat of moral nihilism that they believe widespread atheism would pose. The rhetoric between the two sides of this intellectual divide often is alienating,[2] unsympathetic and divisive (Zorn). With both sides staking their claim on representing the *truth* about the world (or as near as one can hope to get to truth, in the case of more nuanced atheistic arguments), understanding, considerate remarks and affirmation of any common social goals rarely are exchanged between the two groups. In cases where such consolations are made, mouthpieces for the respective camps often reject them (Myers, "Officially Disgusted"). As I will discuss in later chapters, the adherence to the divisiveness within this public discussion is, in my view, unnecessary. The point of such discussions should

[2] The late biographer, social commentator, and renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens said, "I think religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred and contempt, and I claim that right" (Hagarty).

be to reach common ground in some capacity, rather than simply emphasizing the differences between groups and exacerbating any social tension between them. While common ground should be sought and the conversation would benefit from less contentious rhetoric, beliefs *do* have consequences and disagreements need not be silenced.

Whether one believes or disbelieves in the existence of God, theological (or atheological) propositional beliefs are not trivial. At least, they are not always so. As the popular atheist author Sam Harris correctly notes, "A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life…. Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings" (Harris, *End of Faith* 12). For example, religious beliefs help to propagate and justify religious "rites, rituals, prayers, social institutions, holidays, etc." (Harris et. al., "Neural Correlates" 2). The recent atheist movement has relentlessly espoused the fact that beliefs have consequences in their attempt to undermine belief in God and stem what they see as the negative effects of the belief (e.g., violent religious fundamentalism, illiberal religiously based political policies, religiously inspired pseudoscience). However, this movement has largely ignored any emotionally difficult or undesirable outcomes of deconversion from theism.[3] Potentially emotionally negative aspects of the experience of deconversion should have an impact on the tone and treatment of atheistic polemics and evangelism (for lack of a better word.)

In the U.S., issues surrounding the "religion and science" debate, as it has been termed (Dennett & Plantinga; Ecklund), are reported in various mainstream media outlets

[3] The potential social difficulty of deconversion (i.e., leaving the church) is sometimes referenced, but individual psychological distress is conspicuously absent.

regularly, if not daily. These stories, detailing everything from controversial religious statements made by politicians (Seelye, "Santorum Pressed") to challenges to the free speech rights of atheist groups (Medina, "Where Crèches Once Stood"), often directly address the differences in perspective between those who disagree about the existence of God. While the prevalence of news stories related to this issue shows that God belief (or lack thereof) has effects at the social level, the tension between theism and atheism operates on the individual level as well. As sociologist Phil Zuckerman writes, "in the United States, where religion is vibrant and pervasive, apostasy is more controversial, more deviant, and thus *personally* more intense and dramatic" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 171, emphasis mine).

So, in exploring the deconversion process, the question of what the individual experiences is particularly important. What, then, is the theism/atheism disagreement *really* about on the individual level? This question can be interpreted in various ways depending on the particular definition of terms being employed, and the question of definitions will be addressed in Chapter III. However, in its most popular form, the answer to this question is that theists and atheists disagree conceptually about the existence of a very distinct *personality*. God, popularly conceived, is essentially an all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing *person* (usually a man), who has at least some control over the events that transpire in the world.[4] Since Freud's early attempts at explaining religious thought (*The Future of An Illusion*), those working in psychology of religion have understood anthropomorphism as being a central characteristic of religious thinking. Pascal Boyer, a prominent scholar in psychology of religion, has written, "That gods and

[4] Other proposed definitions of "God" are considered in Chapter III.

spirits are construed very much like persons is probably one of the best known traits of religion" (*Religion Explained* 142). This anthropomorphic tendency holds true for prominent conceptions of the Christian God as well, and it has implications for the phenomenological (or subjective) experience of Christians who experience a deconversion from theism.

Since God is often conceptualized as personal, God is *experienced* as personal for many Christians. Obviously, the atheist position is defined by its lack of an affirmation, or explicit denial, of this supernatural personality. The deconversion shift, then, from Christian to atheist is a shift from believing in and experiencing a personality as present, to disbelieving and *not* experiencing that same personality. The loss of God will therefore, in many cases, be experienced as the loss of an objectively existing personality. In other words, if one stops believing in a supernatural person (e.g., God), it is often psychologically and phenomenologically similar to a situation in which that person was actually present and then went away. This fact about the conceptual content and experiential aspects of the theistic and atheistic positions, respectively, makes the experience of death an illuminating analogy for thinking about the subjective experience of deconversion from theism.

Throughout the following chapters, I will explore the analogy of death and deconversion in greater depth, as well as the shift's implications for the deconverting individual's view of the world. Death and deconversion both imply a reduction in the number of active persons that the individual perceives in their environment. Given the particular characteristics that are usually implied by the God concept (e.g., omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence), I will argue that deconversion can have broader

implications for one's view of the world than the experience of human death. The shift from Christianity to atheism has obvious implications for the deconverting individual's relationship to their previously held conception of God (e.g., a renegotiation of their theory of mind, or which events in the world are potentially classified as *social interactions*.) This particular re-understanding of one's social environment, in turn, has repercussions for teleological beliefs about the world. Although I am not attempting to set up an anti-atheistic argument and am not presuming a theistic view, I will argue that the potentially negative consequences of deconversion from theism should be acknowledged and seriously engaged by those championing a scientifically informed atheism over and against theism.

One literary work that exemplifies some of these issues is the American writer Cormac McCarthy's play *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*. In the play, an atheistic college professor (referred to as "White") has attempted to commit suicide by jumping in front of a speeding train. However, a working-class religious man (referred to as "Black") saved White at the last moment. The play takes place inside Black's apartment in the aftermath of the incident. The two have an in-depth philosophical discussion, sparked by the topic of White's attempted suicide. Their colloquy touches on the nature of life, meaning, and religion. In McCarthy's particularly rich dialogic style, the two characters reveal the underlying postures and assumptions of their respective positions. The opening discussion between them exemplifies some of the fundamental differences in their views of the world:

Black So what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?

White Why are you supposed to do anything?

Black I done told you. This aint none of my doin. I left out of here this mornin to go to work you wasnt no part of my plans at all. But here you is.

White It doesnt mean anything. Everything that happens doesnt mean something else.

Black Mm hm. It dont.

White No. It doesnt.

Black What's it *mean* then?

White *It doesnt mean anything*. (McCarthy 3-4, emphasis mine)

Several pages into the play, this discussion of meaning streams into a conversation that is decidedly theological:

White Who appointed you my guardian angel?

Black Let me get my coat.

White Answer the question.

Black You *know* who appointed me. I didnt ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this mornin.

White I didnt leap in your arms.

Black You didnt?

White No. I didnt.

Black Well how did you get there, then?

The professor stands with his head lowered. He looks at the chair and then turns and goes and sits down in it.

Black What. Now we aint goin?

White Do you really think that Jesus is in this room?

Black No. I don't think he's in this room.

White You dont?

Black I *know* he's in this room.

The professor folds his hands at the table and lowers his head. Black pulls out the other chair and sits again.

Black Its the way you put it, Professor. Be like me askin you do you *think* you got your coat on. You see what I'm sayin?

White It's not the same thing. It's a matter of agreement. If you and I say that I have my coat on and Cecil says that I'm naked and I have green skin and a tail then we might want to think about where we should put Cecil so that he wont hurt himself. (McCarthy 9-11)

What are Black and White disagreeing about in this scene? Black sees the event of White's near-destruction as inherently meaningful, part of a divine mandate or plan. White, on the other hand, views the incident as simply one more in a long chain of occurrences, empty of inherent meaning. Many of the deeper issues and questions about the human experience are buried within the subtext of this scene. These ideas all seem to relate to, or result from, the characters' disparate views on God. In this fictional case, these contrasting worldviews motivate the characters to espouse very different values and to see different actions as appropriate (e.g., White's suicide, Black's living in spite of difficult conditions). This important and consequential disagreement obviously is not confined to discussions between fictional characters. The dispute between those with

theistic and atheistic perspectives has a noteworthy impact on our world today, as much if not more than in the conversation's long history.

In the following chapters, we will explore how certain psychological aspects of deconversion from theism can be thought of as phenomenologically (that is, subjectively and experientially) similar to the experience of death as an objective socio-environmental change. Necessitated by such a paradigm shift is a change in the number of entities to which one ascribes mental states (i.e., theory of mind cognitions) and, consequently, in the understanding of the scope and nature of purpose (i.e., teleological thinking.) These shifts in theory of mind and teleological thinking are likely to intertwine and advance one another and, in doing so, present some of the same phenomenological experiences as does the death of someone in one's life.

Chapter II: God's Country - The Broader Relevance of God Belief

Within the covers of the Bible are all
the answers for all the problems men face.
– President Ronald Reagan

How dismal it is to see present day Americans
yearning for the very orthodoxy
that their country was founded to escape.
– Christopher Hitchens, author

Today, discussions and debates about religious issues in the U.S. are myriad. Such conversations increasingly are fueled by the relatively recent rise in the availability of mass communication through the internet (e.g., blogs and social networking sites). This increase in the number of people one can readily communicate with has provided the possibility of interaction between people of widely varied, and often conflicting, backgrounds and worldviews. Those with contrasting opinions on politics, art, sports, and more, are able to find others who share areas of interest or conviction and argue for their respective viewpoints. The same is true of religious beliefs. A quick search engine visit provides access to message boards, blogs, and other online forums dedicated exclusively to theological discussion and debate.

Providing ease of anonymity, online communication allows less popular views to find a voice and, in some cases, networks of supporters. Online, those with socially unpopular viewpoints can express themselves without the threat of the social repercussions that standard public communication would entail. The recent rise of the online atheist movement is a perfect example. In the U.S., atheism is a view that can engender such social repercussions. One recent study suggested that social distrust toward atheists is comparable to distrust toward rapists (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan).

Despite the negative view of those with atheistic beliefs, the online atheist presence has grown significantly in the past several years. The internet, therefore, can be seen to provide a medium that is able to reduce the threat of social stigma, and an online presence can help to relieve this stigma in face-to-face real world interactions in communities across the country.

As mentioned before, the differences between theistic and atheistic worldviews often translates into disparate views on social issues and public policies. Rarely does a day go by without a news story involving religious groups seeking political or social actions that seem inappropriate to atheists, and even religious secularists. For example, in June of 2012, Mayor Tim Yates of Monroe County, TN began displaying the Ten Commandments in the county courthouse alongside other "historical documents," such as the U.S. Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. While the mayor's office has said the display is not religious, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization working to protect separation of church and state, called the display "unconstitutional" (Henry, "10 Commandments"). This story is one of the increasingly frequent examples of the clash between those who believe Christianity has a place in U.S. governmental institutions and those who are, or represent, atheists and secularists.

The U.S. is increasingly religiously diverse and much of this diversity comes from people disaffiliating with those religious groups to which they previously belonged. In fact, those citing "None/No Religion," "Atheist," and "Agnostic" collectively accounted for 16.6% of the U.S. population in the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin & Keysar). And as of 2012, 5% of those in the U.S. identify as "convinced atheist[s]" (WIN-Gallup International 15). At the other end of the spectrum, one reason

that religious beliefs have such a pronounced effect on political affiliations and opinions about social issues is the influence of the movement known as the Religious Right, a conservative born-again Christian movement that has been vocal and politically active for the past several decades.

Born-Again Christian Theism and U.S. Society

When discussing Protestant Christianity in the United States, terminology can be confusing. Terms such as "evangelical," "fundamentalist," "Pentecostal," "conservative," "charismatic," and "Bible-believing" often refer to overlapping but potentially distinct groupings of people adhering to certain theological belief systems or aligning with particular religious organizations and networks. For reasons touched upon below, these indistinctly used terms can even reference people who have a set of specific conservative political affiliations. For my purposes, I will use the term "born-again Christians" to refer to "pentecostal and charismatic as well as fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants who mobilized politically and *culturally* [beginning] in the 1980s" (Harding xvi, emphasis mine).

The famous Scopes Trial of 1925 may have been a legal victory for Biblical-literalist Protestants, but the trial also entailed a "cultural verdict," which deemed fundamentalist Christianity as "a rigid, homogeneous thing stuck in the past" (Harding 62). The Scopes trial and the increasingly secular nature of what was considered appropriate in American public life helped launch several decades during which Biblical-literalist Protestants disengaged from conversations in the American public sphere. During this time, many predicted a future of ever-growing secularity and decreasing

organizational religiosity. This view became known as the "secularization hypothesis" and was embraced by many philosophers and other thinkers who focus on the sociological aspects of religion.

In the early 1980s, however, a shift occurred in American Protestant Christianity. With the rise of organizations such as the "Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable, and Christian Voice" (Harding 79), Protestant Christianity became highly politically engaged. Politically active organizations designed to promote born-again Christian values, which are usually synonymous with socially conservative politics, became prevalent. The anthropologist Susan Harding, in her seminal work *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics,* notes that the born-again movement that began three decades ago "broke through the array of cultural barriers that had quarantined [born-again Christians] from other Americans for half a century" (79). In other words, born-again groups in the 1980s began to view their religious beliefs as having very distinct political implications. Counter to the claims of those espousing the secularization hypothesis, this politically active strand of born-again Christianity is still highly politically relevant in the United States three decades after its initial development.

The continuance of this born-again Christian political activism can be seen in news reports on an almost daily basis.[5] The groups that represent the born-again Christian viewpoint are often associated with anti-gay rights, anti-abortion, and pro-creationism education stances. Currently active born-again Christian organizations such as Focus on the Family,[6] Rock For Life,[7] and The Discovery Institute[8] exist in order to advance

[5] For example, today as I am writing, a quick search of the headlines provides a story in which two born-again politicians who formerly ran for the presidency are attempting to rally support for a private company that recently voiced its opposition to the legalization of gay marriage (Brumfield).
[6] focusonthefamily.com

politically the aforementioned positions, respectively. The expansive funding and social capital that born-again Christian values and groups hold in the United States ensures that any public conversation in which the born-again Christian worldview is engaged, especially a conversation in which the view is being challenged, will be highly politically charged.

This born-again Christianity is not only politically relevant, however. Obviously, it is also personally significant to millions of believers. The theology that draws born-again Christians into the public square is the same theology that makes the analogy with death appropriate when discussing deconversion from theism. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter IV, the aspect of born-again theology that is most pertinent to this approach to deconversion is its anthropomorphic and relational nature. Politically charged born-again Christianity typically espouses a personal concept of God, who is often seen as morally and politically opinionated, to which believers can *relate*. Various recent polling suggests that the personally accessible God of born-again Christianity is significant to millions in the U.S. In fact, "at least a quarter of all Americans follow a faith in which the Christian god is understood to be intimately and personally present" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 15). In a 2005 Newsweek poll, 75% of respondents said forging "a personal relationship with God" was "very important to their religious practices" (Beliefnet.com). This God is not relevant to all Americans, however.

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[7] rockforlife.org
[8] discovery.org

Atheism, Non-religiosity and U.S. Society

As mentioned previously, atheism is not a popular worldview in the U.S. and is often treated with suspicion and social distrust. By some indications, however, the U.S. population's wariness toward atheism has decreased over the past few years. For example, a majority of Americans (54%) said in a June 2012 Gallup poll that they would vote for a well-qualified atheistic presidential candidate. That number is up from 40% in 1978 and 49% in 1999 (Jones, "Atheists, Muslims See Most Bias"). This slight improvement in the public acceptance of atheistic Americans still leaves their presidential prospects dead last in comparison to the other minorities mentioned in the Gallup poll. The slowly growing level of tolerance for those with atheistic worldviews certainly is correlated with the increase in atheistic organizations, which are making their voices heard in the current public conversation.

The Secular Student Alliance, a college and high school student group that works to promote "science, reason and free inquiry" ("A Brief History of the Secular Student Alliance"), now has over 230 local chapters in the U.S. In 2003 they claimed only 42 groups (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 4). This recent rapid growth is especially impressive considering that this subset of Americans were considered "few in number – and not an organized or self-conscious group" as recently as 2006 (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann 214). The massive sales of now-famous (or infamous) atheist polemics in the early 2000's brought atheism to the forefront of American social discourse and were particularly relevant in light of the religiously inspired attacks of September 11, 2001. Oft-cited examples of such works include biologist Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*

(2006), philosopher Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004), and political journalist Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (2007).

Another reason for the slowly increasing acceptance for atheists in America may be, as was mentioned before, the fact that more people in America identify as non-religious, atheist or agnostic than they have in the past (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life; WIN-Gallup International). However, rather than only being a cause of increased acceptance, this shift in religious affiliation may also be an effect. In other words, the increase in reported non-religiosity may result as much from the perceived social acceptance and freedom to report one's beliefs in such a way, as it does from shifts in the privately held convictions of individuals.

While the new atheist movement that is "self-conscious" and "organized" is certainly limited to the last decade, atheism as a worldview and philosophical outlook stretches back into human history at least as far as ancient Greece, where the term "*atheos*," the etymological root of the word "atheist," was born (Bremmer 22). For more than two millennia afterward, "atheist" was used as a pejorative term for one's ideological adversaries, but found its first well known use as a positive self-description by the 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot. The fact that in the 18th and 19th centuries the term was associated with "immorality and lawlessness…. led those who were unable to subscribe to orthodox theism to coin new terms of self-definition, which would allow them to remain uncontaminated by the stigma of atheism."[9]

[9] Indeed, even today the term "atheist" retains some of its condemning sting, especially in more culturally religious areas of the U.S. One distinctive feature of the recently budding atheist subculture is that the movement has largely embraced the "atheist" designation and attempted to spin the term as a positive title, or at least an accepted one (Hyman 30).

The 20th century, particularly the last several decades, saw a "'radical godlessness' that was, by world historical standards, unique" (Hyman 32). Why the last decades of the 20th century should be fertile ground for a rise in atheism is beyond the scope of this work, but has been discussed at length elsewhere (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* 115-118). Nevertheless, it is clear that "Christians in late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century America… live in a world in which it is entirely possible to take for granted that talk of the supernatural is bunk…. Faith has become more self-conscious; doubt of the idea of the supernatural itself hovers as a plausible reality. And what it is to believe has changed" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 319). Just as American Christianity has changed dramatically in the past several decades, so has American atheism.

"Atheism" as a newly relevant social identification is struggling to find its parameters and define itself within current public conversations. As atheism and non-religiosity become more prominent, academics have only begun to look into this previously ignored area of potential intellectual exploration. Sociologist Phil Zuckerman, in his book *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, discusses the statistically common characteristics of those who disaffect from religion. Using the word "apostates" to refer to non-religious individuals, Zuckerman writes:

> …from the handful of sporadic studies that have appeared over the past 50 years, certain findings have been consistently reported. For example, apostasy rates are higher among men than women. Apostates are also more likely to be left-leaning politically than non-apostates. Finally, apostates are more likely to be better educated, to get higher grades, and to

> describe themselves as having an 'intellectual orientation' than their religious peers. (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 10)

Many reasons for these likely attributes of the non-religious have been discussed elsewhere, and some will be touched upon later in this work.[10]

Culture Wars: Christianity and Atheism in the U.S.

The last few decades of the 20th century and the first several years of the 21st century in the U.S. have, as we have seen, marked an intensification in the political and social clout of both born-again Christianity and self-proclaimed atheism and non-religiosity. While the born-again Christian movement may be interpreted as partially reactionary to the "age of atheism" (Hyman 32) of the later 1900's, the even more recent atheist movement is certainly also, in part, reactionary to the social and political conservatism, as well as the theocratic leanings, of the Religious Right. Regardless of the respective social and political factors that have allowed these movements to flourish, their opposing views and rhetorics are increasingly politically relevant. This is especially true considering that the "Nones," "atheists," and "agnostics" are collectively the second largest religious demographic, behind the various types of Christianity counted collectively (Kosmin & Keysar).

As mentioned before, online communication has enabled discussions between the religious and the non-religious with a frequency and immediacy that was not available in years past. Using mass communication for conversing about personally held convictions is a double-edged sword, however. While online communication provides the possibility

[10] Chapter III.

of easily accessible and potentially meaningful dialogue across worldviews, it is obvious that such communication often quickly devolves into unnecessary hostility, exclusivism and demonizing. As a July 2012 article in Scientific American puts it, "A perfect storm of factors come together to engender the rudeness and aggression seen in the comments sections of Web pages." Paraphrasing psychology professor Dr. Art Markman, the article continues:

> First, commenters are often virtually anonymous, and thus, unaccountable for their rudeness. Second, they are at a distance from the target of their anger — be it the article they're commenting on or another comment on that article — and people tend to antagonize distant abstractions more easily than living, breathing interlocutors. Third, it's easier to be nasty in writing than in speech, hence the now somewhat outmoded practice of leaving angry notes (back when people used paper) (Wolchover & Life's Little Mysteries)

This problem, inherent to much internet communication, is operating in online discussions between the religious and the non-religious. The fact that these beliefs regarding the nature and operation of the world are of practical import makes the emotionally-charged nature of the online mediums through which many of these conversations take place more than simply a problem of impoliteness or hurt feelings. Current debates about climate change are an excellent example. Theological beliefs have a direct effect on popular belief about human-caused climate change and the appropriate course of action in response to such change. Born-again Christian Americans are less likely than the general population to believe in human caused climate change and are

more likely to see it as "not a problem" (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press). This is not coincidental. As with all beliefs, born-again Christian beliefs have practical implications. Those attempting to broaden the public understanding of human-caused climate change would be well advised to understand the religious dimension of the issue. As an article in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society puts it:

> Skepticism about anthropogenic climate change may… be reasonable when viewed through the lens of religion…. To create a lasting public understanding of anthropogenic climate change, scientists and educators need to appreciate that the very notion that humans can directly change the climate may conflict with beliefs that underpin the culture of the audience. (Donner 1297-1298)

Beliefs about how one's social or physical environment functions, then, are of immediate practical importance. If the Christian God *really does* control the environment, then public policy aimed at reducing greenhouse gasses are, at best, a waste of energy, money and resources, and at worst, a symptom of faithlessness. This is why, as the article cited above states, the values that born-again Christians often hold are "reasonable when viewed through the lens of religion." So, considering that a majority of Americans believe in God, miracles, heaven, Jesus as the Son of God, virgin birth, the Devil, and angels (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 21), the boundary between the values of the religious and those of the non-religious is of paramount importance. Understanding the effects of both theistic and atheistic beliefs on individuals and understanding the experience of those individuals who cross from supernatural theism into atheism is similarly crucial.

More than just abstract fodder for intellectual dinner party discussions, beliefs are "part of the very apparatus of your mind, determining your desires, fears, expectations, and subsequent behavior" (Harris, *End of Faith* 12). Beliefs shape how we interpret our experience of the world. This is why they are so socially implicative. If, as I have suggested, deconversion from theism is potentially phenomenologically and psychologically similar to the experience of the death of someone in one's life, this fact will be important for the approach of atheistic polemicists and the broader religious conversation. But before discussing deconversion's similarities to death, we must explore what the term "deconversion" refers to. While one's beliefs about concepts such as God, religion, and atheism are extremely important, these concepts themselves are often amorphous and difficult to define. What does it mean to "believe in God"? What is "atheism"? These and other questions are addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter III: Help Thou Mine Unbelief - Definitions and Common Causes of Deconversion

If we could only succeed in moving theism aside,
then other avenues for exploring God might
open up before our eyes. – Bishop John Shelby Spong

If God is not some kind of supernatural entity,
then who knows *whether you or I believe in him (it?)?*
....When it comes to God… there is no straightforward way of cutting
through the fog of misunderstanding to arrive at a consensus
about the topic under consideration.
– Daniel C. Dennett, philosopher

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
– Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher

Before attempting to provide a useful interpretation of the deconversion experience, it is necessary to elaborate on functional definitions of the relevant terms. Unsurprisingly, many of the qualitative and intuitive terms utilized in the study of religion, including "religion" itself, do not readily suggest clear-cut definitional boundaries. It should go without saying that the following discussions about the meanings of terms are not intended to be exhaustive, only adequate. While sufficient and succinct declarative definitions may not be available, attempting to limit the vagaries of the significant words to some extent will help to clarify the essence of my argument and reduce the number of objections and critiques that might arise due to preventable misunderstandings.

First, what is "religion?" The term "religion" originated in a Judeo-Christian framework and "still has its clearest application in this context" (Martin 217). This fact, which is often problematic when exploring non-Western religious traditions, should pose

little problem within the context of this work. Religions typically feature ritualistic behavior, implications for social group hierarchy and formation, sacred texts, and behavioral prescriptions for adherents. These factors are present within American born-again Christianity as well. However, the primacy apportioned to the literal *belief* of doctrinal propositions by most born-again Christians will underlie any use of the term "religion" within this paper. Without belief, the other aspects of born-again Christianity are viewed, by many Christians, as insufficient.[11]

Like the term "religion," other words employed in debates and discussions between the religious and the non-religious, such as "God," "theism," "atheism," and even "science," are difficult to define. Who counts as an "atheist?" Who counts as a "theist?" How do we decide? The popular Christian author and pastor Rob Bell writes in his book *Love Wins*, "Often times when I meet atheists and we talk about the god they don't believe in, we quickly discover that I don't believe in that god, either" (Bell 9). Statements like this one reveal the elusiveness inherent within the issue of determining God-belief.

Given the various plausible nuances of the terms and even in light of the attempt at definitional clarification that follows, "theism" and "atheism" should be considered opposite ends on a spectrum, rather than mutually exclusive binary oppositions. As Phil Zuckerman writes of his experience interviewing those who have disaffected from religion, "apostasy does not always result in the embracing of absolute, convinced atheism" (Zuckerman 2012, 151). In other words, the terms "theism" and "atheism" are approximations, rather than absolutes. Obviously, in the context of this work,

[11] This emphasis on belief is evidenced in the examples of clergy whose jobs have been threatened due to a shift in nothing more than propositional beliefs (Worth; Hagerty "From Minister to Atheist").

"deconversion" refers to an individual's shift from theism to atheism. But, what does that mean?

Starting Point: Theism

The term "theism," within this work, will refer to worldviews that affirm the objective existence of God. While some Christians believe that the concept of God is useful in a metaphoric, symbolic or interpretive sense, I will use the term "theist" to refer only to those individuals who ascribe to God an objective and human-independent existence. This belief in God as objectively *real* is virtually ubiquitous within American born-again Christianity.[12] This somewhat clears up the intention of the term "theism." But, even ascribing to theists the belief that God is objectively real, the question remains as to the appropriate use or meaning of the term "God." *What* do theists believe is objectively real?

In their article exploring the experiences of preachers who no longer believe, Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola fittingly describe the range of theological possibilities:

> A spectrum of available conceptions of God can be put in rough order, with frank anthropomorphism at one extreme – a God existing in time and space with eyes and hands and love and anger – through deism, a somehow still personal God who cares but is nevertheless outside time and space and does not intervene, and the still more abstract Ground of all Being, from which (almost?) all anthropomorphic features have been

[12] The belief is also held by a vast majority of Americans in general (Newport, "More Than 9 in 10").

> removed, all the way to frank atheism: nothing at all is aptly called God. (Dennett & LaScola 124)

These differing meanings to which the word "God" may be attached all find expression within American Christianity. Rival conceptions of God may even be found within the same church building unbeknownst to church members, as most communities and services do not rely heavily on consensus about theological nuances.[13]

In *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God,* an extensive study about American Christianity, psychological anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann notes that what born-again Christianity has seen "in the last four or five decades is the democratization of God" (35). Believers, Luhrmann says, are determining and defining their theology for themselves (at least more so than in the past), rather than having it decided for them by the church hierarchy. This distinctly Protestant feature has been the source of innumerable splits among denominations due to disagreements about any number of theological details. But while there are many ideas of God on offer in the religious marketplace, some wildly divergent, born-again Christians usually agree about God sufficiently for communication and the recognition that the God concept is similar among them.

Behind the scenes of popular Christian teaching and services, philosophical theology often engages the idea of God in sophisticated and counterintuitive ways. The philosopher Robert McCauley claims that such theological doctrinal interpretations are highly counterintuitive. He writes, "Theology is one of the few academic undertakings

[13] "Many people are utterly comfortable with this curious ignorance; it just doesn't matter to them what the formulas mean that their churches encourage them to recite. Some churches are equally tolerant of the indeterminacy: as long as you 'have faith' or are 'one with Jesus' (whatever you think that means) your metaphysical convictions are your own business" (Dennett and LaScola 124).

that can result in formulations that are very nearly as distant from and as obscure to humans' common understandings of the world as the most esoteric theoretical proposals of science are" (McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural* 212). For example, the theologian Paul Tillich writes, "if God encounters man God is neither object nor subject and is therefore above the scheme into which theism has placed him" (Tillich 187). Theological conceptions of this kind are not easily spread into the everyday thinking of born-again Christians regarding God. Lay-believers may profess some counterintuitive theological propositions within the Christian creeds and statements of belief,[14] but otherwise, such philosophical theology has little impact on popular thought about God. Like most popular thought regarding God, born-again Christians typically cluster around the more anthropomorphic side of the theological spectrum. For this reason, I will not focus on the various conceptions of God provided by philosophical theologians except insofar as such conceptions may play a role in the deconversion experience in question.

Evolutionary psychologist Justin L. Barrett, in his influential book *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, discusses the likelihood of anthropomorphizing one's concept of God, regardless of one's reflectively stated theological beliefs. Describing the results of a series of experiments that he conducted, Barrett writes:

> People's reflective beliefs about God fairly closely matched the exotic theological properties many world religions embrace and teach. When these same individuals recalled or paraphrased sketchy accounts of God's activities, however, they systematically misremembered God as having

[14] For example, "[God] is an infinite, unchangeable Spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, goodness, justice, power and love. From all eternity He exists as the One Living and True God in three persons of one substance, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, equal in power and glory" (VineyardUSA, "What We Believe").

> human properties in contradiction to these theological ones. (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* 10)

Potential explanations for this tendency toward "theological incorrectness"(McCauley 219) will be discussed later.[15] For now, it is enough to note that people, born-again Christians included, are inclined to think of God in human terms.

In fact, born-again Christianity often freely embraces the anthropomorphized concept of God and makes little attempt to explicitly reconcile any counterintuitive theological claims that contradict this anthropomorphization.[16] For the purpose of this work, then, the term "God" will refer to the concept of the objectively existent super*human* personality believed to have created the world, who is relational and actively present, and who born-again Christians identify both as Jesus Christ and as the God of the Christian scriptures.

Destination: Atheism

Since a workable approximation of the word "God" has been provided, the term "atheism" could simply mean either lack of belief or disbelief in this concept. However, there are a few problems with taking this approach. One problem is that such a definition of "atheism" is only a negation. And while the morphology of the word doesn't suggest positive content, in order to speak about deconversion, some suggestion as to the deconverting individual's endpoint is needed. Additionally, within the current atheist movement in the United States, when someone identifies as an "atheist," they often mean more than simply to negate the definition of "God" that I have provided above. Jains and

[15] Chapter V.
[16] Discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

Buddhists, for example, would most likely disbelieve in the aforementioned God. But when referring to someone as an "atheist" within the context of the public conversation between the religious and the non-religious in the U.S., one rarely means that the person so described is a Jain or a Buddhist. Moreover, even some of the more liberal Christian theologies could be termed "atheism," if the term simply referred to the rejection of the given definition of God.[17]

Referring to atheism in terms of the currently accepted connotation, I will follow the example of the most famous (infamous?) figurehead of the New Atheism movement, Richard Dawkins. In *The God Delusion,* his bestselling book promoting atheism, professor Dawkins deals with the question of the definitions, using the term "atheism" as a synonym for philosophical naturalism. He writes, "An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *super*natural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand" (Dawkins 14). In this sense, atheism entails certain positive beliefs about where the boundaries of reality lie and the nature of the contents of reality, namely, that all reality is ultimately physical. This narrower definition will be of use in avoiding possible confusion regarding non-theistic, but still supernatural or otherwise non-scientifically informed worldviews. I will not consider such views atheistic.

[17] Such liberal (i.e., less-anthropomorphic) theology may be seen as a potential transitional stage prior to atheism for the deconverting individual, as is discussed in Chapter V.

Common Causes of Deconversion:
Involuntariness, Personality, and Conceptual Aspects

Now that we have considered the content of the deconversion experience, we come to the question of causes. What could cause someone to deconvert from theism? One can imagine any number of reasons an individual might leave a particular religious community. Marriage into another religious tradition, moving away from one's community, personal or political disputes, differing religious needs, and even disliking the style of music during services, are all potential reasons for leaving a religious community. One thing is clear about these reasons. They are, to a greater or lesser extent, voluntary. In the American religious landscape, people *choose* to leave religious institutions and organizations, even if some may feel compelled by various circumstances.

However, regardless of church attendance, the changing of one's *belief* as in the deconversion experience, is often involuntary. Those who become atheists are often *unable* to continue believing in the various supernatural claims presented by their previously held religious tradition. Both theism and atheism are "cognitive models or representations of the physical, biological, and social worlds" (Feist 86), with the distinguishing feature being the use/non-use of the concept of a supernatural God. Such theories, or mental representations of how the world functions, are means of "interpreting and organizing sensory experience" (87) and, as such, are weakened by any experiences that contradict the theory or any of the known implications of the theory.

Psychologist of science Gregory Feist describes the epitomic scientific thinker as "one who is most likely to confront inconsistent evidence and ultimately, if the evidence stands, change or modify theory to incorporate the new evidence" (96). The pattern of

changing theory to fit with available experiential evidence, rather than vice versa, can be seen in many cases of those who have deconverted, which affirms the association of atheism with a scientifically informed worldview and illuminates the common born-again Christian aversion to science. In addition to being unable to choose the effects of evidence upon one's view of the world, new evidence that pertains to one's worldview often comes, at least initially, unsolicited. For example, daily news reports of human suffering need not be sought out for the purpose of testing one's theological beliefs, but the potential of such reports to undermine popular conceptions of a loving God is obvious.

Many born-again Christians espouse a position known as "voluntarism" in regard to peoples' theories about the world. Voluntarism is the claim that one *chooses* one's beliefs about the world. Though unconvincing, this assessment of the nature of belief is a logical necessity within the context of the broader born-again Christian worldview. If faith in God is a *virtue* and the lack of faith is a *vice*, then it must be possible to hold the atheist (or other theological offender) personally accountable for her lack of belief. In order to hold the atheist responsible for her lack of belief, belief itself must be of a voluntary nature, rather than being something that is constrained by the person's given experience and thought. This voluntarism can be seen in the words of popular born-again mega-church pastor Rick Warren. He writes, "People become atheists because of hurt, then seek intellectual arguments to validate their *desire* to live without God" (Rick Warren, rickwarren). However, much evidence counters such voluntaristic assessments.

For example, in their interview-and-questionnaire-based study of people who were raised religious and became irreligious after childhood, psychologists Bob

Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger found that the inability to affirm certain *concepts* was often a cause of adulthood deconversion. They summarized their interviews:

> The problems that came up most often in *most* students' minds (i.e., what happens to us when we die, the death of a loved one, or the problem of evil – arguably *emotional* issues) seldom came up *first* in the minds of budding [apostates]. Instead, the things that bothered them tended to arise in the realm of *ideas*…. [They] were working from a different page than most other teenagers were. They were examining the *truth* of their religion. (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 112-113)

Evidence of the involuntary nature of deconversion from theism is also found in the fact that many of those who deconvert *do not desire* to disbelieve. Atheist and former born-again Christian missionary Kenneth Daniels writes of his personal longing to believe:

> If I could patch things up by forcing myself to believe again, I would do so in a heartbeat. Unfortunately I have tried that several times, only to be besieged again by doubt, and come to the conclusion that attempting to will myself to believe that which in my heart I do not believe is futile. In this struggle I am not alone; *millions* of others have passed through the valley of the shadow of doubt finding themselves unable to return to the pastures of faith, despite repeated appeals to God to restore their faith. (Daniels 4)

Many, perhaps most, of those who deconvert do not wish to believe again. But, the fact that some do wish to believe[18] reveals the involuntary nature of one's interpretation of the world.

The likelihood that a person will feel the need to reconcile her theory of the world with the challenging available evidence (i.e., the likelihood that a person will think scientifically) may partially have its roots in the individual's personality. For example, in Altemeyer and Hunsberger's study of those who changed their religious orientation in adulthood (i.e., religious to non-religious, or vice versa), they found that those who became religious scored significantly higher than the average on the Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale, a scale that measures tendencies toward being an "authoritarian follower" (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 106). "Such persons submit to established authorities more than normal, tend to attack others in the name of authority, and stick to social conventions more than most people do" (106). On the other hand, those in the study who had become non-religious were "decidedly *un*authoritarian"(106).

Gregory Feist expounds additional evidence that suggests certain personality correlates with tendencies toward scientific interest and thought. While this evidence focuses on those who are either professional scientists or students of science, it is relevant to the discussion of deconversion in that professional scientists are more likely to be atheistic than the general population (Ecklund 15-16). Several personality traits correlate with having a lower "threshold for being interested in or having a career in science" (Feist 117). For example, cognitive traits such as "conscientiousness"[19] and "openness to

[18] Zuckerman quotes an atheist he interviewed, "As deeply as I missed my faith, as hard as I tried to keep it, my head could not command my gut. I know now that it was wishful thinking, not truth" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 90).
[19] "…that is, their desire for order, organization, and punctuality" (Feist 117).

experience"[20] are found at higher levels among scientists than in nonscientists. Socially, scientists "relative to nonscientists, do prefer to be alone and are somewhat *less social and less affiliative*.... [they] have relatively low thresholds of social stimulation, and therefore solitary activity of small group interactions are ideal" (118). These summations of the personality traits of scientists are obviously only statistical averages. Still, they suggest both a personality dimension of scientific interest and thought and a potential personality dimension of irreligiosity and atheism.

Conceptually, there are many elements of a traditional theistic view that may undermine belief in God, specifically within born-again Christianity. For example, the doctrine of hell, the problem of evil, and scriptural descriptions of God's actions that are judged to be immoral, all may challenge the perceived legitimacy of the concept of God. Interestingly, such beliefs are often seen as a package, rather than considered separately. When someone is unable to reconcile their religious tradition's view of God with the suffering in the world, for example, they rarely simply begin to believe that God is perfectly content with such suffering. Rather, it is more common to abandon the concept of God altogether.[21] The fact of the cohesiveness of inter-related religious ideas, such as God, hell, and heaven supports the view of religious beliefs as comprehensive theories or worldviews, which are abandoned by deconverts in the face of contradicting evidence. Not all of those who deconvert engage with the foundational theological ideas of the religion they are rejecting, but some certainly do. In fact, individuals sometimes "[begin] their journey at the heart of the matter, wondering if God really exists" (Altemeyer &

[20] "…being willing to admit when you may be wrong once the evidence shows this to be the case" (Feist 117).

[21] In *Faith No More,* Zuckerman discusses the pseudonymously referenced "Milton" and his deconversion. Milton began to believe that the concept of hell was "manifestly inhumane," and this was the "first domino to fall" in Milton's journey to professed atheism (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 143).

Hunsberger 111). For some, the large religious questions regarding "the deep, profound matters that give life meaning" (20) are defining and of the utmost personal importance.

The Potential Emotional Importance of God-belief

Deconversions from theism are as multifaceted as any human experience. Thus, they may be experienced either as *mild* or as *transformative*,[22] depending on the individual's feeling about the importance or centrality of God belief. Belief in God is not always experienced as something central to the life of the deconverting individual and in such instances the shift to atheism is rather experientially mundane. Such deconversions can be termed "mild." Often, especially in more religious cultures, belief in God is foundational to one's experience of the world, especially if one has made sizeable personal investments of time, energy or resources to endeavors that assume the existence of God. When belief in God has been an important part of an individual's life up until the shift to atheism, the individual has experienced a "transformative" deconversion. Transformative deconversions entail a "personal revolution, a life-altering transformation," and involve "a massive psychological reorientation from a religious to a secular worldview" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 7). Setting aside mild deconversion, which is by definition relatively personally unimportant, the analogy with death that is expounded in the remainder of this work will be oriented toward understanding the experience of transformative deconversion.

Another useful analogy that illuminates transformative psychological change of any kind, including deconversion, is the "web of belief" model for understanding

[22] Terminology adapted from Zuckerman, *Faith No More*.

worldview shifts.[23] Philosopher Owen Flanagan, in his book *The Problem of the Soul*, provides a succinct explanation of the web-of-belief model. Flanagan writes:

> The point is that different beliefs involve different degrees of personal investment…. When the web's periphery is damaged, repair is simple. When the center is damaged… I may have to rebuild from scratch. I may need to move and build a new web elsewhere. Some kinds of damage to an existing conceptual-conative scheme [that is, web of belief] may be easily fixed, other kinds of damage, depending on how close to the center they hit, are more costly. (Flanagan, *Problem of the Soul* 35)

Transformative deconversions can be thought of as those deconversions where the concept of God is "close to the center" of the person's web of belief.

Transformative deconversion obviously implies that the individual *really* believed in God beforehand. Certainly, many who are religiously affiliated affirm religious doctrines simply for social, moral, or other personal reasons. Not all people who attend churches and profess the creeds believe in God or even care about such cosmic or metaphysical religious questions. But, individuals who undergo the transition from true and invested belief to true disbelief experience a powerful shift in their experience of the world. This brings us to the question that will drive the rest of this work: Is there a subjective experiential difference between a change in one's world*view* and a change in one's world? In regard to the topic at hand, is there a phenomenological similarity between deconversion and living in a world in which God was *truly* there and then *truly* went away? These two circumstances, I will argue, are not as different as we might

[23] The logician Willard Van Orman Quine originally suggested this model.

initially suppose. People's theories about the world are an important and influential backdrop for all of their experiences. When one's theory about the world changes, I will argue, one's world changes, at least phenomenologically. "Theories organize our observations of the world; in fact, we could not perceive without them" (Feist 97).

Chapter IV: Where is God Gone? – The Death of God as a Phenomenological Reality

I had hoped that the heart of reality might be of such a kind that we can best symbolize it as a place; instead, I found it to be a Person. – C.S. Lewis

Unlike skepticism or naturalism, Christian faith is not simply an assent to propositional truths; it is a commitment to the person of Jesus. - Kenneth Daniels, former born-again Christian missionary

There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. – The Baptist Faith and Message, creed of belief professed by the Southern Baptist Convention

Since we have established the socio-cultural context in which the type of deconversion being explored takes place and the fact that deconversion, so defined, involves particular involuntary conceptual shifts in a person's worldview that are potentially experienced as emotionally impactful, we now turn to the question of *the ways in which* deconversion may be analogous to the experience of death. In this chapter, we will explore the personal and interactive nature of many born-again Christians' relationships with God and will discover that they are often best thought of as psychologically real relationships. In light of this fact, when the relationship is terminated through the deconversion process, God is experienced as truly going away, or dying. While anthropomorphic language is often used to some extent when discussing God, it is obvious that not all conceptions of God, when disbelieved, are experienced as death. The extent to which the anthropomorphic language is *literally* believed will be the deciding factor in how the believer experiences God. As was previously mentioned, born-again Christians usually affirm very anthropomorphized conceptions of God. So the politically

influential God and the God who dies via deconversion are often the same. First, then, we will explore how believers experience the person-like God of born-again Christianity.

God, The Person

For born-again Christians in the U.S., God is real, present and active. Every week believers fill churches expecting more than just coffee, community, music, ritual and morals in the form of sermons. Those aspects of church services are inarguably important. For many believers, however, these are not the ultimate reasons for attending church services. Many churchgoers desire and expect to directly experience the presence of God. God is, for these believers, "intimate, personal, and supernaturally present" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 13). Conceiving of God in this way is clearly consistent with a literal reading of the Christian Bible, in which God is represented as an external personality who interacts with many people including Abraham (*Today's New International Version Bible*, Gen. 15) and Moses (Exodus 3 & 19). And for born-again Christians, Jesus of Nazareth represents the ultimate anthropomorphic manifestation of God. Interestingly, God is not only thought of and talked about in these person-like ways, he[24] is *experienced* as person-like.

Tanya Luhrmann recounts various experiences with born-again Christians in which they described their relationships with God as being real to them. They "pray to a God with whom they communicate directly and clearly" (Luhrmann "God as the Ground," 19). And they experience God as responding. One of Luhrmann's interviewees, pseudonymously named "Sam," came to feel God as "sensorily" present. Luhrmann

[24] Throughout this work, the pronoun "he" is used when referring to God because within born-again Christianity God is usually conceived as male.

quotes Sam, writing, "It's kind of weird, but walking down the street randomly, making up songs no one's ever heard of, and just singing to him – it makes me feel so wonderful to know that he's listening and walking right beside me…. You know beyond a shadow of a doubt that somebody is there with you" (*When God Talks Back* 148-149). Luhrmann's study is full of similar reports of personal experiences of God.

These personal experiences with God are promoted and encouraged, Luhrmann argues, through prayer and church services. She writes:

> [Born-again Christians] speak about 'getting to know' God, learning who he is, talking to him about their day. They describe God and Jesus as people you need to meet personally, as if you were out for coffee and had to figure out what the person across the table from you really meant. As one congregant said, 'It's just like any relationship. If I had a best friend and we never hung out, where would our friendship be?' (*When God Talks Back* 48)

One Christian in the study even reports that she sometimes "laughs out loud when she's praying. She says [God is] her best friend" (70). The born-again Christian God is still seen as the all-knowing, everlasting and powerful creator of the Universe, but he is also understood to be intimately close with believers. The title of "best friend" is often used (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 5-6, 48, 70, 116, 195).

The believer, however, does not simply decide that God is her best friend and subsequently have realistic experiences with God. These experiences are usually cultivated through individual or communal interaction with God. In fact, many born-again Christians begin their relationship with God by treating him *as if* he were really

there, even though not quite believing it. Luhrmann tells of a pastor encouraging his born-again congregation to "experience God as a friend" (74) through acts like pouring God a cup of coffee in the morning and providing a chair in which God can sit. Such behavior can reinforce the person's belief that God is really present, listening, caring, and active.

Whether through seemingly eccentric behavior such as affirming God's presence with props, or simply practicing "chatting easily, comfortably, and openly with God about whatever [comes into their heads]" (75), the experience of God as a present personality must be nurtured. Christians who enact their beliefs and experience God in this way are not (usually) mentally imbalanced, therefore their encounters with God are "in a different epistemological category than an encounter with an actual human or, for that matter, than whatever the Bible [says] about God" (80). In other words, it is not that born-again Christians believe God *is* a person, but they experience him, in some ways, *like* a person.[25] Luhrmann writes that those in her study "set out, at the church's invitation, to treat God like an imaginary friend. When [she] asked people whether they experienced God as an imaginary friend, they usually rejected the word *imaginary* – and then accepted the comparison" (77).

Interactions with God, in many ways, resemble everyday human-to-human interactions. While God's characteristics are obviously fantastic, for reasons we will discuss later in further detail,[26] the conceptual content and emotional trajectories of interactions with God are quite mundane. A believer's relationship with this God

[25] This is not surprising, considering that "religious agents' counterintuitive properties notwithstanding…. They exemplify all of the standard sorts of interests, motivations, and states of mind that we recognize and acknowledge in our fellow human beings" (McCauley 185).
[26] Chapter V.

resembles a human relationship to the extent that it can provide great comfort in times of distress or threat. The relationship is different, however, in that belief in God's supernature allows for the perception of *unconditional* and *universal* love and purpose for the believer. This aspect of perceived omnibenevolence allows for insight into some people's post-deconversion longing to believe.

So, regardless of one's verdict on the ontological question of the existence of God, born-again Christians' *relationships* with God should not be doubted. God, whether he exists or not, is a concept and an intentional object to which believers actually relate, and these relationships are often very emotionally powerful. Evidence for God's independent existence may be spurious, but that does not allow us to discount the reality of meaningful relationships with God. As philosopher Wayne Proudfoot puts it, "A person might be afraid of a ghost. His fear and the ghost are conceptually related in that reference to the ghost is necessary in order to identify his fear. This holds even though there are no ghosts and his fear is unfounded" (101). The person's fear, induced by the idea of the ghost, is no less real because the concept "ghost" is not the most accurate possible conceptual representation of her objective physical environment. The same is true for experiences of God's love and care. The experienced love or friendship of God cannot be discounted only because the God believed in is not ontologically independent.[27] Aside from the philosophical justification for seeing relationships with God as real relationships, empirical findings in psychology provide additional support.

[27] For further discussion, see Dennett, *Breaking The Spell* 210-215.

God, The Attachment Figure

Originally made famous by developmental psychologist John Bowlby (*Attachment and Loss*), "attachment theory" proposes that humans have an in-born "psychobiological system (the *attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to significant others (*attachment figures*) in times of need as a way of protecting themselves from threats and alleviating distress" (Grandqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver 49). Attachment figures not only function as a *safe haven* by providing protection from threats, but also act as a *secure base* from which to explore the uncertain aspects of one's environment. This social psychological model was initially suggested with the intent of understanding the relationship between human infants and their parents (primarily their mothers.) The motivation for proximity produced by the attachment system is thought to be evolutionarily adaptive in that it increases the likelihood that the infant will be protected from harm. The nature of the infant's relationship to the mother/guardian (or attachment figure, more broadly) is identified along a spectrum of three attachment styles, depending on the infant's response to the guardian's presence and absence, respectively. The attachment styles can be summarized as follows:

> *Secure:* "…characterized by confidence in a caregiver's capacity and willingness to provide protection and comfort. It is also characterized by an ability to distinguish between situations in which protection is needed and ones in which it is not and an ability to flexibly shift attention and behavioral engagement between attachment and nonattachment activities…. In contrast, attachment insecurities are characterized by

difficulties in distinguishing safe from unsafe situations and by the use of mental resources to deal with anxiety caused by unreliable or unavailable caregivers." (Grandqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver 50)

Insecure - Anxious/Ambivalent: characterized by a tendency to overenthusiastically seek proximity to attachment figures.

Insecure - Avoidant: characterized by a tendency to "defensively minimize proximity seeking to protective others." (50)

Expanding on the theory's initial utility in developmental psychology, it was soon suggested that the attachment system continues to be "active and influential throughout the [person's] lifespan" (Kirkpatrick & Shaver 316). The attachment model has since been successfully used to interpret behavior and attitudes toward various intimate relationships throughout adolescence and adulthood. The theory has been particularly useful in understanding the psychological components of adult romantic relationships (Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver 2). Considering the explanatory power and plasticity of the attachment model, it is no surprise that it has also been used to illuminate psychology of religion.

Reinforcing the evidence previously discussed, that born-again Christians tend to experience God as present regardless of his objective existence/non-existence, psychologist Lee Kirkpatrick was the first of many to explore the idea that a religious believer's perceived relationship with God could be understood in terms of attachment theory ("Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion"). Since Kirkpatrick's initial suggestion, much experimental work has been done exploring the extent to which "believers' perceived relationships with God tend to meet the defining

criteria for attachment relationships and hence function psychologically much like other attachments" (Grandqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver 51). God relationships have shown, in many experimental settings, to adhere predictably to attachment model explanations (i.e., to function similarly to other *real* relationships).

For example, evidence from a 2004 study suggested that one's God concept has the capacity to function as a safe haven, to which individuals may seek to draw near in response to threats. In this study, participants' anthropomorphic theological convictions were assessed by having them "indicate on a six-step response scale (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed with the single statement, 'God is a living, personal being who is interested and involved in human lives and affairs'" (Birgegard & Grandqvist 1125). Participants were then exposed to subliminal messages that were flashed through a lens too quickly to be consciously registered, either "mother is gone," "God has abandoned me," or a control ("people are walking"). Those primed with statements that posed "threat of separation" scored higher on post-priming measures of seeking proximity to God (1133). The upshot of this particular study is that "God validly can be seen as an attachment figure and that the attachment relationship with God is influenced by [the individual's] attachment history" (Birgegard & Grandqvist 1132).

Reinforcing the idea that God functions as a safe haven, "there is considerable evidence to support the view that people turn to religion particularly in times of distress and crisis, and it is important to note that they turn at such times to *prayer*... rather than to *church*" (Kirkpatrick, "Attachment and Religious Representations" 807). This suggests that believers turn to God, rather than exclusively to religious peers in times of distress. Experimental findings have also shown that individual differences in believers'

relationships with God predictably manifest along the aforementioned spectrum of attachment styles (i.e., secure, anxious/ambivalent, avoidant).[28] Given the predictive power of interpreting God belief in an attachment framework, it seems safe to say that for some believers the God-relationship functions as a *real* attachment relationship (Grandqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver 13).

The understanding of God functioning as an attachment figure, more broadly of God-relationships functioning as psychologically real, fits comfortably alongside related evidence from many different disciplines. As discussed above, anthropological research suggests that American Christians often relate to God as if he were a present personality (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*). Philosophically, God is an intentional object that can play an explanatory role in one's theory of the world and of one's emotional experiences, regardless of the question of God's independent existence (Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*; Proudfoot). From a sociological perspective, belief in God is highest in countries "where food and shelter are scarce and life is generally less secure" (Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Figures" 55). This sociological pattern holds true even within the U.S., from state to state (Zuckerman, "Atheism, Secularity, and Well-being" 955). Belief in God tends to be the highest in states where social ills (e.g., murder rates, poverty, obesity, infant mortality, teen pregnancy) are most prominent (955, 960).

These sociological findings corroborate the psychological literature, which suggests that God has the potential to serve as a compensatory attachment figure when others are unavailable or inadequate (Kirkpatrick, "Attachment and Religious

[28] The believer's style of attachment to God is thought to have some relation to her attachment style regarding her parent/guardian. However, there is no clear consensus on whether God relationships simply mirror parental attachment ("correspondence" hypothesis) or counteract the effect of distant or inadequate parental attachment relationships ("compensation" hypothesis) or both. For a full discussion of both hypotheses, see Grandqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver 53-56.

Representations" 812). God, in the case of ill-functioning societies, may provide "a sense of felt security and a secure base for exploration [or navigation] of the environment" (807), which is not otherwise available given uncertain social conditions.[29] So, considering that there is sufficient evidence for concluding that born-again Christians have *real* relationships with God from a psychological and phenomenological perspective, a question presents itself. Does God's absence after deconversion have effects similar to death, psychologically and phenomenologically?

Death and Deconversion: Some Differences Acknowledged

Before laying out the case that God's absence after deconversion and the absence of a person after death both have similar consequences for cognition and experience, it is important that I counter possible misunderstandings and/or preemptively undercut possible objections to my position. Spelling out exactly what I do *not* intend to say will serve the double function of both preempting counterarguments and spelling out more clearly exactly what I *do* mean.

First, it should be obvious that I am not claiming that deconversion, like death, is inevitable. It is obvious that many believers live long lives and believe in God throughout their entire lifespan. Deconversion will only result from certain sets of particular psychological, social and cultural circumstances that are sufficient to produce not only adherence to born-again Christianity initially, but later, disbelief in the God of born-again Christianity (and in my use of the term "deconversion," disbelief in gods and the supernatural more generally).

[29] This suggestion of a causal account is purely hypothetical, as only a correlational relationship between social ills and religiosity is shown. However, exploration into the nature of the correlation between the two would be an exciting and potentially socially helpful area of research.

Second, I am not suggesting that because some deconversions may have emotional and conceptual similarities to death, they therefore necessarily have the same emotional *intensity*. The intensity of the deconversion experience will depend largely on the perceived importance of the individual's relationship with God (i.e., the proximity of the God concept to the center of the individual's "web of belief," to revisit a metaphor.) My intuition is that the majority of deconversions will be less emotionally intense than the experience of the death of someone, due to the fact that the God of born-again Christianity is not experienced *as* a person (e.g., he is not seen, touched, or heard at length, literally), but he is experienced *much like* a person[30] (e.g., his presence is emotionally felt, the perception of communication occurs, and he is occasionally literally heard) (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 233-234). However, whether deconversion is, on average, more or less emotionally intense than death for those who deconvert is an open empirical question.

Third, death and deconversion are not likely to have similar sequential emotional stages; rather they are both potentially emotionally significant and share key conceptual shifts. While this may seem at first to present a problem for the proposed analogy, it is not a problem in that neither deconversion *nor death* is likely to have a set of standard sequential emotional stages. There are myriad examples of deconverts recounting their experience using very different emotional language, some describing deconversion as "liberation" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 32) and some saying they "barely functioned" (The Chaplain) for some time afterward. As for the experience of death, recent research

[30] "The main point is that the mental muscles developed in prayer work on the boundary between thought and perception, between what is attributed to the [believer's] mind… and what exists in the world. They focus attention on the words and images on one side of the boundary, and they treat those words and images as if they belonged on the other" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 184).

on grief has undermined the soundness of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's famous five-stage model of grief.[31] Kübler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying*, hypothesized that those facing either their own death or the death of another will experience five emotional stages during the grieving process. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance comprise the five emotional stages of the Kübler-Ross model, which has recently been criticized.

For instance, in psychology journalist Ruth Davis Konigsberg's 2011 book *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss,* she writes, "We have been misled by the concept that grief is a series of steps that ultimately deposit us at a psychological finish line, even while social science increasingly indicates that it's more a grab bag of symptoms that come and go and, eventually, simply lift" (11). Konigsberg points out that the Kübler-Ross model tends toward self-fulfilling prophecy and is prone to confirmation bias (72). It is, then, the model's popular frequency that provides the appearance of legitimacy, rather than its scientific utility or predictive efficacy. The lack of stages for either the experience of death or deconversion allows the analogy to proceed unhindered. The two can be thought of as conceptually similar and emotionally impactful for a time after their occurrence.

Finally, the fact that I am suggesting that death and deconversion have the potential to be similar experiences should not be understood as a suggestion that all deconversion experiences are emotionally negative, should be avoided or discouraged, or cause grief. In many cases, deconversion is sure to bring emotional relief or even "joy" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 32). It is obvious that "there can be no single, grand, universal explanation or theory of [deconversion]" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 172).

[31] For an in-depth discussion, see Konigsberg 70-82.

Even focusing on deconversion within born-again Christianity in the U.S., exceptions will occur. That being said, however, some deconversions *are* emotionally negative and *do* cause grief. These instances are usually not publicly highlighted because the atheist movement (for obvious public relations reasons) wishes to portray deconversion in a totally positive emotional light. On the other hand, Christian church leaders usually don't discuss deconversion experiences in detail at all.[32] Also, even emotionally liberating or positive deconversion experiences may be thought of as analogous to death, as will be explored below.

Atheism: The Death of the Personal God

Thus, we come to the hinge of this work: ways in which the experience of deconversion is similar to the experience of death. Practitioners experience the God of born-again Christianity as a present personality, as we have seen. It is the transition from the experienced *presence* of God before deconversion to the subsequently experienced *absence* that most lends itself to the analogy of death. Anecdotal evidence of this characterization of deconversion can be seen in that numerous works utilize the phrase "death of God" (Altizer; Young; Vattimo & Caputo), but none speak of the "malfunction of God" or the "breaking down of God." This is because God usually is conceived to some extent as an intentional and active agent, and therefore "dies" rather than meeting a less anthropomorphic end.

The underlying thread of my argument is that one's beliefs about the world, to a large extent, can shape one's experience of the world. This truth applies to many (most?)

[32] Or if they do, as mentioned before, they usually assume a volantaristic position regarding the deconvert's shift in belief.

areas of human life, but in regard to the topic in question, "God" is a concept that plays a pivotal role in many born-again Christians' understanding of their physical and social environments, as well as their own internal emotional patterns and responses (McCauley 85). God is, then, an intentional object[33] that can play a functionally explanatory and emotionally real role in believers' lives. Philosopher Daniel Dennett discusses the impact that intentional objects can have on individuals' mental lives. Using the example of Sherlock Holmes, Dennett writes:

> It is quite possible for a *mere* intentional object like Sherlock Holmes to obsess people even when they know full well that it isn't real. So it is not surprising that such a thing (if it's right, in the end, to call it a kind of *thing* at all) can dominate people's lives when they believe it in the strong sense, such as the people who spend fortunes hunting for the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot. (Dennett, *Breaking The Spell* 213)

The irreverence of comparing the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot to the God of born-again Christianity notwithstanding, the thrust of the argument remains. Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster are clear-cut cases in which the intentional objects in question are considered by (almost) all to be fictional. Yet, the belief in these intentional objects has a real and observable impact on the believer. In terms of this work, God need not exist as anything other than an intentional object in order for believers to have *psychologically and experientially real* relationships with him.

We have touched on the fact before, but it is worth revisiting in greater depth, that the experience of deconversion is usually involuntary. Deconversion shares this aspect with the experience of the death of another. Aside from the obvious exception of murder,

[33] For a discussion of intentional objects, see Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* 210-217.

the death of a family member, spouse, or friend is not the outcome of one's will or mental intention. Rather, one awakens on an unhappy morning to find that a person one has known is no longer present and active in the world. Whether or not the death is anticipated, the death event itself is a drastic change in one's experience of the world. This aspect of *discovery* as opposed to *choice* is present in the experience of deconversion as well. As philosopher Wayne Proudfoot puts it, "Instances of sudden conversion to or from a religious tradition are few compared to cases in which a person comes to *discover*, on the basis of his observations of his behavior and spontaneous responses over a period of time, that he has lost his faith…" (Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* 111).

Unfortunately, the involuntary nature of worldview adoption is not recognized in much of the literature that utilizes attachment theory in understanding God relationships. For example, psychologist Lee Kirkpatrick writes:

> The threat of separation causes anxiety in the attached person, and loss of the attachment figure causes grief. Determining whether God meets these criteria is a difficult matter, because one does not become separated from, or lose a relationship with, God as one might lose a human relationship partner. *God does not die*, sail off to fight wars, move away, or file for divorce…. The most obvious approximation to separation from or loss of God is deconversion or apostacy…. It is not clear whether "losing" a relationship with God in this way can be expected to engender grief, however, as it is the believer rather than God who is deliberately *choosing*

> *to abandon the relationship*. (Kirkpatrick, "Attachments and Religious Representations" 808, emphasis mine)

This unfortunate misunderstanding of the deconversion process leaves Kirkpatrick overlooking the fact that God (or at least the believer's relationship with God) often goes away without the deconvert *choosing* to abandon her belief. It is reasonable to assume, then, that grief is a likely consequence of such a shift in belief. In religious societies such as the U.S., belief in God is highly valued and this creates an incentive for retaining one's belief even in the face of growing doubt. Some born-again Christians may choose to leave their religious community and self-identify as atheists, but this voluntary change is only in regard to one's social environment and public self-identification, not to one's theory of the world.[34]

The view of deconversion as a gradual and involuntary change, stated above by Proudfoot, is further legitimated by Altemeyer & Hunsberger's study of those who deconverted after having been raised religious. They found that the deconversion process began, on average, at the age of 16.2 and took an average of three years within their sample (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions* 210-211). The authors write, "[The deconverts'] edifice of religious beliefs then began to come apart, brick by brick, until finally the whole design came crashing down. This took a fair bit of time precisely because it took place step by step" (211). For this reason, it seems safe to say that deconversion probably phenomenologically resembles deaths brought on by illness more so than deaths brought on by sudden causes. God does not die in a car crash, if you will.[35]

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[34] Such social changes, most likely, will follow in the wake of a change in one's theory of the world. In other words, when one realize she doesn't believe in God, *then* she might leave her church and call herself an "atheist."

[35] The gradual change of deconverts' concepts of God will be addressed further in Chapter V.

Grieving the Loss of God

The most obvious aspect of experiencing the death of another person (especially a loved one) is that of grief. Deconversion, despite the misunderstandings articulated in some attachment theory literature, clearly has the potential to engender grief in the deconverting individual. A portion of this power, no doubt, comes from the fact that born-again Christianity claims that a relationship with God is a necessary part of human fulfillment and happiness, and believers (i.e., potential deconverts) agree. Like the very fact of God's existence, the claim that a relationship with God is necessary for a good life need not be true to be experienced as true. After deconverting, then, people may not only believe that they have lost a relationship with God, but that this relationship was the only chance of a fulfilling and joyous life. It is not surprising that such a belief would often result in grief.

Examples of grief as a part of the deconversion process can be seen in various qualitative studies on atheism, apostasy, and deconversion. In Phil Zuckerman's study on Americans who have rejected religion, one interviewee is quoted at length discussing the sense of loss that he experienced through his own deconversion:

> The absolute best thing about being religious – or I should say, being an Evangelical Christian – was the deep personal relationship that I thought I had with God. I mean, it's a powerful thing to imagine that the God of the universe is on your side, talking to you on a daily basis, and that you're actually communicating with that God. That's powerful. And I think that gave me some confidence, and it gave me a sense of – that my future was

> really sealed and that God had good things waiting for me – a sense of optimism. (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 129-130)

This man describes the relationship with God as being "the best thing" about being a born-again Christian. The loss of this important relationship has the potential to cause emotional difficulty for deconverting individuals.

One person in Hunsberger and Altemeyer's book *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers* reports that his atheism has "cost him a lot," and that subsequently he "nearly commited suicide" (51). Others who have experienced difficult emotions of loss after deconversion speak of losing the sense of "always [having] somewhere to turn" (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 52). The ability of deconversion to engender grief goes hand in hand with the involuntaristic view of belief. In many cases, if the individual had the ability to choose their worldview, they would choose to believe. This is true at least for some individuals in the beginning of the deconversion process, which can be especially emotionally difficult. One individual writes of his attempts to hold on to the faith that was so important to him:

> I had been a sincere, dedicated Christian, seriously trying to live a Christian life and understand Christian doctrine. And as a result of doing just what I had been told to do – study and learn Christianity – I had discovered a spiderweb of cracks in the very foundation! In short, my gradual loss of faith was not something I did willfully or maliciously. Indeed, I fought. I kicked and raged over each millimeter. It was like losing my heart. (Nahigian)

Those deconverts who speak of the emotional hardship of losing God, often use language that seems to corroborate the view that God can serve as an attachment figure for the believer. One of Zuckerman's deconverted interviewees utilizes such attachment language, tying his relationship with God to his understanding of how safe he feels the world to be:

> It was a little bit saddening for me because I had used it as like a way to feel more secure in life, and felt like I had a purpose and a direction. Losing that made me really feel, like, lost… And… I still don't necessarily have a clear sense of purpose for my life. Which is something that I miss. Because it just feels so much more secure, like: 'I KNOW why I'm here… I KNOW my goals.' Like, I don't really have that anymore. But… it's not as bad as it was at first… I've moved on a bit. (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 130)

In this quotation, the interviewee uses language that mirrors that of the attachment theory model almost verbatim. As a believer, he felt much more "secure." He also employs language that resembles Konigsberg's understanding of the grief process, in that the experience of deconverting was emotionally difficult for the interviewee at first, but the feeling "eventually, simply [lifted]" (Konigsberg 11).

Deconversion that engenders grief may also be especially emotionally difficult when compared to other emotionally difficult situations. Recent evidence suggests that secure attachment to God is a reliable predictor for lower grief in situations of loss (Kelley and Chan 211). The tendency to use God as an attachment figure may increase any emotional difficulty during deconversion if the individual has a "heightened

psychological access to their perceived relationship with God as a safe haven when threatened or distressed, just as people do with human attachment figures" (Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, and Shaver 1).[36] However, in cases of deconversion, the ability of God (who is now believed to be absent) to provide comfort seems unlikely, although to my knowledge no empirical work has been done regarding the question of God's role as attachment figure during deconversion experiences.

So, deconversion and death are similar in that they have the potential to engender grief. However, as mentioned before, even in cases when the deconvert experiences relief or liberation at the loss of God, the analogy with death may still hold. And it is clear that the reactions to deconversion run the emotional gamut from depression and grief to liberation and joy.

Ambivalence or Liberation Toward the Loss of God

The above discussion of the God relationship as an attachment relationship allows us to understand that believers' relationships with God are as diverse as relationships with human attachment figures. Not every believer approaches God by way of a secure attachment style. Some conceptions of God are less than pleasant, as can be seen in more fundamentalist strands of born-again Christianity, where God is portrayed often as an authoritarian leader. Such a conception of God is unsurprising considering that religions frequently, to one degree or another, "promote authoritarian following, teaching their

[36] There is empirical evidence for automatic access to God concepts "following mild and severe distress primes," and the speed at which God concepts are accessed appears to be related to the believer's "interpersonal attachment orientation" (Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, and Shaver 7). The nature of this relationship is contested.

members to submit to religious and even civic authority" (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 236).

Since believers ultimately have a relationship with their *conception* of God, defined largely by their personal experiences and social context, less loving versions of the concept of God may result in insecure attachment relationships. Conceptions of God as an inadequate attachment figure may be reinforced by the individuals' particular attachment style in other relationships. As Lee Kirkpatrick writes, "Individual differences in religious beliefs and experience should parallel individual differences in attachment styles and mental models" ("Attachment and Religious Representations" 809).[37] Reports by individuals who have deconverted support the existence of insecure attachment relationships to God. One deconverted individual writes:

> I put a lot of energy into talking to God and listening for His voice when I first came to Him in high school. In fact, I sought Him with all my heart – every fiber of my being! I've never tried so hard for so long at anything in my life. I pleaded on my knees before Him day and night. I fasted. I prayed. I meditated. I changed everything about myself. I focused on nothing other than hearing His voice and doing His will for more than two years. I can honestly say that I could not have tried any harder than I did. And what did I hear? The voice of one who disdained my every effort to serve Him. Nothing that I did was ever enough. I was a perpetual failure in the eyes of... whatever it was that answered me. If He said He loved me, it was only in the context of "I love you so much... aren't you grateful for

[37] For further discussion of the "correspondence hypothesis," see Kirkpatrick, "Attachment and Religious Representations" 808-812.

> that love? Why are you ashamed to witness about My love to the other kids at school?" If it was God, then He hated me. (Avellone)

This former believer obviously did not experience the purpose or security felt by those who grieved the loss of God. While God provides a secure base and safe haven for some, others experience God as "controlling" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 134), "unjust" (54), untrustworthy (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 122), or perpetually disapproving (Avellone).

When God relationships such as these come to an end, the experience is usually described as emotionally positive. Deconverts who have experienced the loss of an untrustworthy, judging, and authoritarian God explain their shift away from religious belief in optimistic language. One deconvert is quoted as saying, "I feel very liberated…. Now I am free from the fear of religion and the clutches… I don't have anybody controlling what I have to think, what I have to read, what I have to say, who to marry, how to make love" (Zuckerman, *Faith No More* 134).

It is important to realize, however, that just because deconversions from more authoritarian versions of God can engender positive emotional states, rather than grief, they still entail a loss. "Loss" here should not be thought of as a normative designation, but rather as a descriptive term. The concept of God that is lost may be an unhealthy and even dangerous concept, but the God in question is perceived as *going away.* Emotionally positive deconversion experiences still involve a shift from a perception of the actuality and causal efficacy of a personality to that of said personality's absence. Such deconversions may be said to mirror the death of a person whose influence on one's life

was particularly harmful or destructive. Thus, when the person dies one may feel a sense of relief, freedom or liberation.

Deconversion, Selfhood, and Social Context

Though the primary focus of this work is the individual's psychological deconversion experience in light of the loss of the God relationship, a brief discussion of the social aspects of deconversion, as well as the place of deconversion in regard to self-understanding will help to situate and enrich the view of the deconversion process. Deconversions from theism do not happen in a vacuum. Rather, they take place in various social contexts. The social features of this experience are especially relevant considering both the social nature of the occurrence itself (i.e., loss of the *relationship* with God) and the fact that Christian beliefs are usually entrenched in religious communities, such as churches or Bible studies. Those speaking for the atheist movement often acknowledge the possible difficulty of leaving Christian communities after deconversion. However, for this social rupture to be understood fully, it must be considered in the light of the (potentially emotionally difficult) conceptual shift that is undergone by the deconvert, which is the concentration of this work.

For example, the social aspects of one's self-concept are formed, in part, by one's theological beliefs. One's self-concept is constructed out of various pieces of information about one's preferences, personality traits, behavioral tendencies, social roles, propositional beliefs and more (Baumeister and Finkel 145). Belief in God influences one's self-concept by affecting the social roles and labels with which one identifies (e.g., church member, believer, Christian, child of God.) When one experiences deconversion,

then, not only do one's beliefs about and experience of the world change, ideas about the self must be adjusted as well.[38]

Philosopher Alva Noë points out the indeterminacy and problematic nature of the attempts to draw a definitive boundary between what humans believe about the contents of their world and their experience of selfhood, writing, "radical changes to one's environment… for example, in the course of migrating from one country to another, upon the loss of a spouse, during a period of rapid technological change – are enormous, maybe even devastating personal challenges. The loss of a feature of the environment with which one's daily activities are intimately interwoven is the loss of a part of oneself" (Noë 51). If one is a true believer, then, deconversion poses the challenge of renegotiating one's self-concept: a notoriously challenging undertaking.[39]

So, deconversion could be said to imply *two* conceptual shifts in light of the fact that God-relationships may function as attachment relationships. "If God functions as an attachment figure for believers, then they should hold mental representations of (1) God and (2) themselves in relation to God" (Miner 252). This change of the deconvert's concept of *self* as a possible source of difficulty in the deconversion process must be acknowledged, although comprehensive consideration of this issue is beyond the scope of this work. The possible analogy of deconversion as the "death of the believing *self*" would be an interesting area for potential future research.

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[38] This reconceptualization of the self potentially involves adjustment of many levels of one's self-concept: from social labels (e.g., "Christian," "Theist") to one's more fundamental idea of one's personhood (e.g., recognition that humans are animals). This latter shift is due to the fact that "which views about human nature are held is inextricably tied up with views about the nature of God – his mind, his will, his agency, his nature" (Flanagan 2002, 52-53).

[39] There is some empirical evidence that the self-concept changes throughout the process of bereavement, specifically that "the self-concept appears to undergo structural change over the first two years of bereavement" (Montpetit, Bergeman, and Bisconti 620). Given this evidence, investigation into the potential similarities between self-concept change in regard to bereavement and in regard to deconversion would be an interesting area of research.

Also, in terms of the social context of deconversion, the role and reaction of one's community in the aftermath of the event of death is likely very different from the reaction of one's community in the aftermath of deconversion. As I mentioned earlier, social distrust of atheists measures higher than distrust of most other social minorities (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan). Therefore, at least in cases of publicly acknowledged deconversion, the individual is not simply experiencing the loss of the God relationship, but also potential rejection by a social group with which they have heretofore identified.

This is, in part, because the interactions of Christian community members reinforce the affirmation of the objective reality of God for individuals within the community. The social bolstering of God belief can be seen in both ecclesial settings and more informal situations. For example, members of the Vineyard church "would check with each other to see whether they had 'gotten' similar images in prayer. They asked people to pray for them, and sometimes followed up to see what those prayers had revealed" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 65). Communal discourse and negotiation can serve to determine what God is thought to have said or done in a particular community.

The fact that the God concept functions on a social level (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 93, 279, 283), as well as an individual level, undoubtedly makes the deconversion experience more difficult than it otherwise would be for some who undergo such a transition. While deaths often serve to bring communities together in mutual support around those who have lost a loved one, deconversions often cause negative reactions toward the individual who has lost belief in God (Zuckerman 2012, 71). Therefore, the parallels between deconversion and the loss of a relationship due to death

may hold on the individual level (e.g., both are emotionally significant and potentially negative), while at the social level the two function quite differently.[40] The social rejection that many deconverts face, no doubt exacerbates any emotional difficulty they may be experiencing individually due to the loss of the God relationship. In short, when a friend dies, one's community assembles to provide comfort and encouragement. When one's God dies, however, one's community may offer little to no support or understanding, and may even blame the individual who is experiencing the difficult personal shift (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 50-53).[41]

Recent examples of socially difficult deconversions have put human faces on this increasingly prevalent trend of migration of former believers away from religious communities. The cases gaining the most media attention are those that involve clergy members who have lost their faith. Former Methodist pastor and current Public Relations Director for the American Atheists, Teresa MacBain, deconverted over a long period of time. During her deconversion experience, MacBain was still working as a pastor at a Methodist church in Florida and was concerned about the ramifications of her change in belief, both in regard to her social standing and view of herself. MacBain recounts the personal importance of her former faith, "When you believe something so strongly, when you've been immersed in your faith your entire life, when it is just as much a part of you as your arms, or legs, or fingers, then the acknowledgement of change is a very hard pill to swallow. I didn't want to lose my faith. I didn't want to change or stop believing, but I wanted truth *more*!" (Mehta, "Teresa MacBain"). She was reluctant to inform her

[40] Altemeyer and Hunsberger report that most of those in their study who deconverted "felt guilty or fearful about doubting the family religion" and that "they had often paid a heavy price for their apostasy: alienation from their families and loss of friends" (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 213, 215).

[41] Blaming those who deconvert or holding them responsible for their shift in belief, again, reveals a volantaristic understanding of how people acquire beliefs.

congregation of her loss of faith, although she was uncomfortable with her inevitable dishonesty when preaching.

MacBain's apprehension about acknowledging her shift to atheism publicly was not unreasonable. In early 2012, MacBain announced her atheism publicly for the first time when she was unexpectedly given the opportunity to speak while attending an atheist convention. Immediately following the convention, she intended to officially resign from her pastoral position and explain her change in belief to her congregation. However, the video of MacBain's speech at the atheist convention went viral before she had the chance.[42] Her description of the aftermath of her public pronouncement of atheism warrants quoting at length:

> The fallout was immediate and devastating. The church, where I had pastored for over three years, changed all the locks and would not let me on the property to collect my belongings. It took over two months to get them to return my things. The local news ran my story for three weeks, garnering thousands of online comments. I received hateful emails, voicemails, letters, and facebook posts and messages. My son's friends would not have anything to do with him because I was his mother, and many of my husband's co-workers came to him offering their 'sympathy.' One even asked him when we were getting a divorce! (Mehta)

For Teresa MacBain, then, the social consequences of publicly acknowledging her deconversion were significant and largely negative (at least from her former Christian community.) MacBain's deconversion does not appear to have resembled the experience of death, as the majority of her difficulty came from the social and economic shifts that

[42] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgDm8w0-IwY

resulted from the alteration of her belief.[43] But these social and economic difficulties may still be part of the equation for those believers whose deconversions *do* resemble the experience of death, which is likely to exacerbate the potential for emotional hardship.

The deconversion story of former pastor Jerry DeWitt also gained media attention in early 2012. DeWitt lived as a travelling Christian evangelist and speaker based out of DeRidder, Louisiana before his deconversion. As a result of his "coming out" as an atheist, DeWitt "lost his job and his wife — both, he says, as a direct consequence" (Worth). DeWitt has also experienced alienation from family members and former friends. He is now the head of Recovering from Religion, an organization assisting those former-believers who have deconverted. As with MacBain's situation, the social aftermath of the personal deconversion experience was incredibly difficult for DeWitt.

In situations like those of MacBain and DeWitt, we can see that deconversion and death are very different at the social level regardless of their similarities in regard to the deconverting individual. The aftermath of public acknowledgement of deconversion is likely to entail a more reproachful social environment than the experience of death. The atheist movement is in the beginning stages of addressing the need for community among the deconverted in the U.S. For example, MacBain and DeWitt both made their respective moves away from Christianity with the aid of The Clergy Project, a "confidential online community for active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs" (*The Clergy Project*).

The need for community, as evidenced by the focus of this work, is not the only hardship that deconversion poses to the individual experiencing it. The personal

[43] When MacBain was asked if she missed God, she replied "No, no… I can't say that I do" (Hagerty, "From Minister to Atheist").

readjustments that one must make in light of this change are often significant. "The transition away from faith may start with an intellectual epiphany, but it runs through a difficult reinterpretation of your own past. For believers, this often involves what DeWitt calls a 'hook,' or a miraculous story that helps anchor your faith" (Worth). DeWitt's idea of a "hook," an event or experience thought to be miraculous or sacred prior to deconversion, points to the connection between one's worldview and one's experience of the world. After deconversion, one's conceptual model of the world must be reorganized and therefore one experiences the world differently to some extent. Namely, one no longer experiences God as an active and purposive presence. The miraculous, the sacred, and God are no longer concepts that the deconvert can employ when attempting to understand her environment, her experiences, or herself.

Now that I have explored the similarities between the experience of deconversion and that of death, the question arises as to why these experiences should be similar at all. What are the underlying psychological mechanisms that would allow people to experience God as present and active in the first place? I will focus on two specifically,[44] namely, theory of mind and the attribution of teleology, or purposiveness. These two psychological mechanisms, I suggest, play fundamental roles in cultivating the experience of the God relationship for many born-again Christian believers, and therefore, they allow the experience of deconversion to mirror that of death in some instances. I turn first to theory of mind.

[44] I am not suggesting that these two psychological mechanisms are explanatorily exhaustive of the functioning of the God relationship, however.

Chapter V: Who's There? – God and Theory of Mind

...were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see the men themselves…. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men. Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is my mind. – Rene Descartes

My muscles move at my will, and water flows through a river. Who's to say that the river doesn't have a will to move the water? The river overflows its banks, and floods my tribe's gathering-place - why not think that the river was angry, since it moved its parts to hurt us? It's what we would think when someone's fist hit our nose. – Eliezer Yudkowsky

Don't anthropomorphize computers. They hate it. – Unknown

In 1944, psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel conducted a series of now-famous experiments exploring social perception. Heider and Simmel showed participants a video, which featured two triangles of different sizes, a circle and a rectangle. The two triangles and the circle move in various ways throughout the video, sometimes entering and exiting the rectangle.[45]

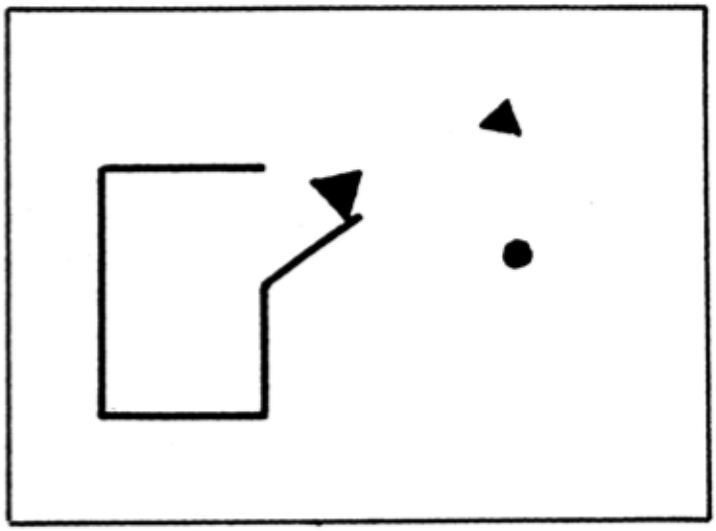

Fig. 1. Screenshot from Heider and Simmel's classic experiment (244).

[45] The video is available for viewing online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZBKer6PMtM

When responding to the prompt "Write down what happened in the picture," all but one participant explained the video in anthropomorphic terms. That is, they explained the motions of the geometric figures in terms of mental states, purposes, desires, and goals. One participant described the scene as follows:

> Triangle number-one shuts his door (or should we say line) and the two innocent young things walk in. Lovers in the two-dimensional world, no doubt; little triangle number-two and sweet circle. Triangle-one (here-after known as the villain) spies the young love. Ah! ...He opens his door, walks out to see our hero and his sweet. But our hero does not like the interruption (we regret that our actual knowledge of what went on at this particular moment is slightly hazy, I believe we didn't get the exact conversation), he attacks triangle-one rather vigorously (maybe the big bully said some bad word). (Heider and Simmel 247)

Even the authors themselves include a description of the video using anthropomorphic terms because, they claim, "a description in purely geometrical terms would be too complicated and too difficult to understand" (Heider and Simmel 245). Why would a purely geometrical description, which is surely more accurate in regard to the actual content of the video, be so difficult to understand?

The reason that anthropomorphic explanations of this video are so readily comprehensible to most people, even though there are no *people* in the video, is because most psychologically healthy human beings have what psychologists describe as the

capacity (and tendency) to form "theories of mind." Theory of mind[46] is the ability to "reason about others' actions in terms of mental states such as beliefs and desires" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 33). The interpretation of the physical movement of animate objects in terms of inferred mental states allows humans to more accurately predict the actions of animate objects.[47] This capacity is so basic and automatic for humans that we are rarely explicitly conscious that we are attributing mental states to other humans during regular social interactions.

I do most of my writing in various coffee shops and when purchasing coffee, I never state my intentions outright in order to gain the initial attention of the server. I never need to stand at the counter and declare, "I am standing here for a reason and it is that I would like to buy some coffee!" The barista's theory of mind in regard to me, leads him or her to assume that, rather than arbitrarily or because of some purposeless external force, I have approached the counter *for some purpose of my own*. The most reasonable inference, given the social context, is that I'd like to purchase something. While the specifics of my order must be transmitted linguistically, the fact that I am at the counter in order to fulfill some desire or goal need never be explicitly stated. The barista infers (correctly, by the way) my mental state, namely a desire to purchase something. This capacity also operates in different degrees. For example, I *infer* that the barista *believes* I am standing at the counter for a purpose. In this case, I am theorizing about the content of the barista's theorizing about me. It is due to this second-order theory of mind (i.e., my inferring the barista's beliefs about me) that I do not feel the need to explain that I am at

[46] Theory of mind is also known as "folk psychology" or "intuitive psychology."

[47] "animate things are the ones that can start and stop and move on their own as well as move in variable ways along irregular paths" (McCauley 77).

the counter for a purpose. In other words, both the barista and I both use theory of mind in order to appropriately navigate this simple social situation.

Humans' theory of mind cognitions engage on a hair trigger, as is exemplified in Heider and Simmel's experiment. At the slightest provocation, humans attribute *agency*[48] to perceptions of movement within their environment. In order to explain this predisposition for attributing agency very liberally, psychologists have posited that humans have "HADD – the hypersensitive agent detection device" (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 32). The HADD describes humans' cognitive tendency to *over*-attribute agency to instances of movement. "HADD appears to register nonintertial, goal-directed movement as caused by an agent and then searches for a candidate agent" (32). This tendency is found even in human infants as young as twelve months (Barrett, *Born Believers* 29). While a technical knowledge of the HADD may be an idea that is most influential within social psychology and psychology of religion, the principle that people over-attribute agency is implicitly understood and utilized in many artistic mediums. One of the most notable areas in popular culture that exploits HADD and theory of mind is horror movies.

For example, a cheaply made independent American horror movie was released in 1999, which found both critical and box office success (Rotten Tomatoes; Box Office Mojo). *The Blair Witch Project,* although fictional, purports to be footage shot by three amateur documentary filmmakers who went missing while investigating local folklore about a witch in Maryland. The three filmmakers spend the majority of the movie lost in the woods. During the daytime scenes they fight over which direction will lead them

[48] The terms "agency" and "agent" can be thought of as including "people and any other beings we understand as not merely reacting to their environment but intentionally acting on it" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 24).

home and at night they are subjected to frightening noises deep within the woods that surround their campsites.

While the film has some truly unnerving moments, the witch (or whatever it is) that is harassing the three young filmmakers never makes an on-camera appearance. Rather, the sounds of sticks breaking, rustling, and noises that sound vaguely similar to human voices serve as forceful suggestions that some*one* is following and harassing the young documentarians. From *The Blair Witch Project* to movies about hauntings that feature furniture inexplicably rearranging itself or characters being attacked by an unseen force, the thrills and chills in many horror movies are brought to us thanks to HADD.

In light of our tendency to over-attribute agency, it is not hard to understand the connection between HADD, theory of mind, and belief in God or gods. As Robert McCauley puts it, "Most prominently, religions proliferate agents. Most popular religion depends upon activating human beings' theory of mind capacities and introducing anywhere from one to hundreds of surplus agents who are ordinarily invisible at least, if not downright impossible to detect by any means" (169). When events occur that are bizarre, or at least defy simple explanation, the attribution of agency is a natural step in attempting to explain said events. Again, this is why the horror movie gimmick works so well. When presented with a noise originating off-camera or a movement that seems to defy our intuitive expectations of physical motion, attribution of goal-oriented agency is a cognitively comfortable approach when attempting an explanation. Less obvious is why agents don't need to "resemble humans" or even "be visible" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 26).

Minimally Counterintuitive Agents

That humans often attribute agency in situations when no obvious agent is present is a strange fact about human agency detection cognitions. It is for this reason that the cognitive "device" that achieves these cognitions is described as "hypersensitive." Situations that make agentive explanations seem reasonable, but that deliver no obvious candidates for agency are explicable in terms of humans' ability to think about agents who are not immediately perceptually present.[49] The ability to think about absent or unseen agents confers an obvious evolutionary advantage by helping people be prepared to respond advantageously to both opportunities and threats. "The expense of false positives (seeing agents where there are none) is minimal…. In contrast, the cost of not detecting agents when they are actually around (either predator or prey) could be very high" (Boyer 145). But why should ideas of *permanently* invisible or undetectable agents be so widespread and even institutionalized in some cases?

The psychological anthropologist Pascal Boyer, in his seminal 2001 book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought,* offers an explanation for humans' belief in agents with strange features such as invisibility, omnipotence, the ability to break or adjust the physical law of cause and effect, and so on. He claims that these concepts are memorable because they are "counterintuitive,"

[49] "To function properly in social groups, survive the threat of predators, or capture prey, we (like our ancestors) must be able to think about agents we cannot even see. Tracks, traces, noises, or even inexplicable silence need to be useful as cues that an agent might be around, watching and waiting" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 32).

which is to say they violate our intuitive expectations about the ontological categories to which they belong. Boyer writes:

> To produce a good supernatural concept, you must describe something as belonging to an ontological category. But there are not many different ontological categories. Indeed, we have some reasons to think that ANIMAL, PERSON, TOOL (including many man-made objects other than tools proper), NATURAL OBJECT (e.g., rivers mountains) and PLANT more or less exhaust the list. Once you have the ontological category, you must add a violation. (Boyer 78)

Agents such as gods, devils, demons, ghosts, spirits, witches, and saints are particularly memorable because they are "minimally counterintuitive" (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 22), that is they only counter our intuitions in one or a few aspects. Concepts that are overly counterintuitive[50] are easily forgettable because they don't allow us to apply other intuitions about the ontological category to infer further information about the concept in question.[51] A minimally counterintuitive agent (e.g., a man whose only counterintuitive characteristic is invisibility) violates our expectations enough to be intriguing, but still allows us to make standard inferences based on the agent's ontological category (e.g., the invisible man still has desires, preferences, emotions, is subject to the law of gravity, and will eventually die). So, humans' theory of mind

[50] "For instance, a dog that was made in a factory, gives birth to chickens, can talk to people, is invisible, can read minds, can walk through walls, and can never die" (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 23).
[51] For a discussion of the operationalization of counterintuitiveness and explorations of the potential cognitively "optimum" amount of counterintuitiveness, see Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness in Religious Concepts."

capacity,[52] HADD, and the memorability of minimally counterintuitive agents (and concepts more generally) all function together to provide the fertile ground of human psychology from which belief in gods (and God) grows. However, the psychological features that underlie God belief may be necessary,[53] but they are not sufficient.

The Born-again Christian God and Theory of Mind

Despite being cognitively "natural" (McCauley), belief in supernatural agents such as God must be reinforced individually and communally, especially in religious landscapes like the United States, where skepticism always poses a threat. Tanya Luhrmann claims that interacting with God, in the born-again Christian context, is a skill that must be learned. She writes, "Whatever one makes of the ontological claim that the person praying is a link [between God and the person being prayed for], prayer clearly *is* a technique: a skilled practice that has to be learned. Like many skills, acquiring it seems to have consequences" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 135).

The "skill" of prayer, then, takes explicit practice. Humans, as we have explored, have tendencies to understand events by positing agents who possess mental states. The fact that humans often interpret occurrences of different kinds (e.g., otherwise random physical motion) in terms of goal-directed agents (including God) is supplemented by the born-again Christian focus on communally professed doctrinal beliefs, religious social

[52] Boyer cautions against an oversimplified understanding of theory of mind, writing, "our internal description of other people's mental life is not the product of a single, general theory of persons but the outcome of many different perceptions, simulations and inferences about different aspects of what they experience. What seemed a unified domain of 'intuitive psychology' is in fact a collection of subdomains with specialized systems" (105).

[53] For instance, autism is thought to impair theory of mind judgments (Boyer 221-222; McCauley 252-259). This impairment seems to be related to religious thought, reinforcing the role that intuitive psychology plays in God belief (McCauley 262-263; Norenzayan, Gervais, and Trzesniewski).

hierarchy, and explicit instruction on how to communicate with God. These supplements, Luhrmann argues, actually serve to change these Christians' theory of mind. She writes:

> This new Christian theory of mind – we could call it a "participatory" theory of mind – asks congregants to experience the mind-world barrier as porous, in a specific, limited way. Humans are usually keenly aware of the difference between mental events generated within the mind (we call them thoughts) and those generated from an external source (which are usually called perceptions)…. These evangelical Christians, then, not only have to accept the basic idea that they can experience God directly; they must develop the interpretive tools to do so in a way that they can authentically experience what feels like inner thought as God-generated. (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 40-41)

If Luhrmann is right, certain religious practices (e.g., communal and individual prayer) can shift or focus the operations of humans' theory of mind (133). When undergoing this particular shift, Christians continue to attribute most of their own internal thoughts, mental images, and emotional states to their own agency, but they also learn to attribute certain thoughts to a *separate* agency. They learn to experience some internal thoughts, images, and emotions (as well as certain external events) as having originated from God, rather than from themselves. They interpret their own mental life as being the product of *two* agents (i.e., themselves and God), as opposed to only one agent.[54]

[54] For an interesting and relevant discussion of the implications of anthropomorphic interpretations in regard to the ontology of minds, see Dennett, "True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works." Dennett's focus on appropriate interpretation as criteria for the existence of minds is interesting in light of novel interpretations, such as those presented in Luhrmann's study of born-again Christians.

With practice and the help of the cognitive tendencies bestowed on them by human nature, born-again Christians can cultivate the psychologically real relationship with God that we have been exploring from various angles. While this relationship may begin with the believer "pretending" that God is present and active in her life (71-75), it does not continue to be experienced as pretend. Luhrmann writes:

> [believers'] mental images and their sensations – became sharper and richer and more powerful, they spoke as if their sensory perceptions of the materially external world became heightened. They imagined God vividly, and they had rich, deeply emotional, often playful relationships with God. They felt his love intensely, and *they mourned his absence deeply*. (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 133, emphasis mine)

Mourning the absence of God, whether during short episodes of doubt or throughout the process of deconversion, is possible due to the development of a psychologically *real* relationship with one's conception of God. This relationship, in turn, is made possible by humans' cognitive capacity to attribute mental states in various ways to many kinds of phenomena and to relate to the agents (in this case, God) that are posited as explanations of the phenomena in question. Both death and deconversion entail a reduction in the number of agents that one utilizes to relate to and explain her environment. In the case of death, a human being has ceased to be an active agent in the world. Through deconversion, God is no longer experienced as an active agent in the world.[55]

[55] "Both belief in God and belief in other minds arise from the operations of nonconscious mental tools generating a nonreflective belief. Other minds and God receive affirmation from a huge number of mental tools, experiences, and memories" (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 98).

The inevitable importance of agentive explanations can be seen at many levels of humans' attempts to understand the world. As Robert McCauley writes, "Agents' intentional states and actions are the threads that stitch episodes together both in narrative lines and in human memory. From those intentional states and actions that our theory of mind serves up, we weave the patterns in the fabric that constitutes our social and personal worlds and many peoples' understandings of their physical surroundings as well." (McCauley 185).

The way that humans conceptualize the world, God or no, tends toward agentive explanations that explicitly invoke or implicitly suggest mental states, preferences, and desires. These agentive explanations, if believed, can affect humans' experiences of the world. Agentive explanations are not only apparent in social circumstances and religious beliefs, but also in the natural sciences. For example, biologists often discuss natural selection as if it "wanted" or "preferred" mutations for some purpose, such as the genetic fitness of the organism (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 113).[56] Anthropomorphic descriptions of realities that do not *actually* involve agents is almost unavoidable (e.g., Heider and Simmel's explanation of the geometric video.) This reduction in the affirmation of agentive interpretations is found not only in the natural sciences, however. It is also found in certain types of theology.

The Dead God of Liberal Theology

While the shift from born-again Christianity to atheism is the focus of this work, God also may be experienced as ceasing to be an active agent in the world in cases where

[56] "Microbiology seems particularly susceptible and the literature is littered with examples of bacteria having to 'make a choice to use a particular substrate' or a 'decision to make a compound' and even 'needing something'" (Davies)

a believer's conception of God drastically shifts, but is not wholly lost. This fact can be seen in less anthropomorphic theologies, including liberal Christian theologies. For example, versions of Christianity, sometimes referred to as "non-theistic" or "*God-as-essence*" theologies, represent "ever more abstract and depersonalized" conceptualizations of the representational content of the word "God" (Dennett, *Breaking The Spell* 205). These theological positions are doubly relevant to the topic at hand. First, because many who deconvert from born-again Christianity cite a transitional stage in which they adhere to a more liberal version of Christian theology (Worth; Vorjack),[57] and second, because liberal theologies often espouse a less person-like God, which relies

Fig. 2. Atheist Cartoon (NakedPastor).

[57] Though it goes without saying, there are exceptions to deconverts experiencing a slow transition out of Christian theism through liberal theology. Altemeyer and Hunsberger write of their sample of deconverts, "They had hardly 'drifted' into non-belief, but instead had made a 'break' so sharp you could almost hear it snap" (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 234).

less on believers' theory of mind capacities and more on conceptual debate and argumentation. More liberal versions of God are usually less anthropomorphic (McCauley 153), and therefore are too counterintuitive to influence the average believer's behavior.

The extremely counterintuitive nature of more sophisticated religious philosophy or theology is a feature that it shares with science. As Robert McCauley writes:

> Carefully crafted theological formations – for example, the classical Christological doctrine that Jesus is both fully God and fully human simultaneously… have arisen from processes of argument and debate that are similar in many respects to those carried out in other scholarly inquiries, including scientific ones. (McCauley 211-212)

Both detailed systematic theologies and scientific theoretical models are counterintuitive and mostly the fare of intellectual elites, specialists, or academics.[58] Paul Tillich's idea of the "ground of Being," (160) and Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong's idea of God as "the inescapable depth and center of all that is" (70) do not lend themselves to agentive explanations and to obvious inferences in the ways that the anthropomorphic God of most born-again Christianity does. The impersonal nature of these liberal theologies puts them at a disadvantage when compared to more anthropomorphic, and therefore cognitively intuitive, conceptions of God.

In fact, some experimental work suggests that when average believers (as opposed to theological experts) are presented with an ambiguous account of God's actions, they rely more on anthropomorphic conceptions of God for their understanding than on

[58] In fact, there is evidence to suggest that most religious scientists "tend to view themselves as religiously liberal" (Ecklund 35).

conceptions that are overly counterintuitive, even if the latter are doctrinally orthodox.[59] This tendency toward "theological incorrectness" (McCauley 219) may explain why more abstract, less anthropomorphic theologies sometimes serve as a stepping-stone on the deconverting person's path to atheism. Science and philosophical theology both reduce the role of agentive explanations in mental models of the world (McCauley 117).[60] However, a reduction of agentive explanations that utilizes familiar religious or theological terminology (e.g., the *term* "God," even if referring to an entirely different idea) may be less initially threatening to the totality of a deconverting believer's worldview.

In cases where a born-again Christian deconvert passes through one or more stages of liberal or non-anthropomorphic God belief, the death of the deconvert's gradual loss of the belief in God may resemble a long battle with disease. God could be said to gradually lose those qualities that made him who he was. What was once a robust and active personality progressively gives way to less personal forces or processes.[61] The perception of agency gradually fades from the believer's mind, replaced by impersonal physical causation, human agency, and circumstances beyond the control of agents, human or otherwise. While I have discussed the immediate similarity between death and deconversion in terms of the perceived reduction of agency, the role of God in most born-

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[59] "Participants may assent to theologically correct claims, they may listen to extensive explications of those theologically correct formulations, they may even memorize all sorts of propositions about them, but it does not follow that the mysteries and paradoxes those claims involve are anything that connect with those participants' day-to-day thought or reasoning about the matters in question. Religious participants are prone, in short to theological incorrectness" (McCauley 218-219).

[60] "physical scientists often have temperaments that orient them away from the social and toward the inanimate – their interest and ability in science is then just one expression of this orientation" (Feist 119).

[61] This progression away from agentive explanations also has been and is occurring in the natural sciences. "over the past four centuries modern science has progressively banished reliance on agent causality, first, from the explanations of physical phenomena and, subsequently, from the explanation of biological phenomena" (McCauley 117).

again Christians' minds makes God's death more significantly implicative than other deaths for the deconvert's view of the world as a whole. This is due to the shift in teleological or purposive thought necessitated by deconversion.

Chapter VI: Deconstructing Paley's Watch – The Decline of Purpose

[The world] is magic, true or false… I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it. There was something personal in the world, as in a work of art. – G. K. Chesterton

Hence it is plain [natural objects] achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer.
– Thomas Aquinas

God didn't create anything without a purpose,
but roaches come pretty close. – Unknown

For those with regular exposure to religions in the United States, especially born-again Christianity, the claim that there is a necessary link between a purposeful life and belief in God is not a novel idea. Pastors often claim that the atheistic life is hopeless or lacking in meaning and purpose, implying or explicitly stating that humans' only hope for a purpose in life is Christian theism and salvation.[62] Non-religious sources often make the assumption that the question of God's existence and the question of life's purpose are conceptually interrelated. This belief, that life's purpose is related to the issue of theism, is not an arbitrary feature of Christian doctrinal teachings. It is, rather, a philosophically

[62] "The Bible teaches that creation in general and human life in particular were made by God, belong to God, exist for God, are restless apart from God, and will return to God. If you do not believe in the doctrine of creation, you likely believe that you came from no one, you are alive on earth *for nothing*, and that when you die you will go nowhere…. Indeed, if no savior is coming to rescue me, and there is no better place to which I can escape at the end of this life, then once the pain of this life gets too much to bear, I should simply hasten the inevitable. And many do" (Driscoll 104-105, emphasis mine).

reasonable position to take, regardless of one's theological beliefs. In other words, the question of whether God exists has implications for the question of life's purpose, *whether or not God exists.* The reason the two are connected is that the presence of purpose (or teleology) is necessarily related to the presence of agency.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, "agency" can be understood as encompassing "people and any other beings we understand as not merely reacting to their environment but intentionally acting on it" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 24). I will use "purpose" and "teleology" interchangeably within this work to refer to the end state or goal of actions or processes, represented mentally by one or more agent(s) *before* its actualization and therefore, brought about intentionally.[63] Purpose entails *forethought*, a mental representation of a possible future state of the world, or a goal. Purpose is, therefore, a phenomenon that is logically derivative of the phenomenon of agency. There is no such thing as an *inherent* purpose. Meaning must have a mean-er and purpose a purpose-er.

For this reason, if life as a whole has a purpose, it must come from some agent who is positioned as such that he/she can intend or foresee the end or goal of life itself. The theological relevance is obvious. God, a being posited as the creator of life and the Universe, is in the position to have made life and the Universe *for some purpose.* God is in the position to have mentally represented the end or goal of the Universe and life (including individual lives) before he created them. God is the agent who *foresees* the Universe and life, a cosmic agent bestowing purpose on the world.

[63] While other definitions of "purpose" or "teleology" that do not rely on psychological or mental phenomena have been articulated, such definitional nuances, for the most part, are only directly relevant to specialized areas within philosophy and the natural sciences (Allen).

The most popular conceptual link between purposive thought and an agentive God is the claim that the apparent design of living things is evidence for a creator of those living things, namely God. This is known as the "Teleological Argument" for the existence of God, or the "Argument from Design" (Craig). While some verses in the Bible make similar claims about the natural world being evidence of God's existence or intention (*Today's New International Version Bible*, Romans 19), the eighteenth-century philosopher and Christian apologist William Paley most famously articulated this line of reasoning in his work *Natural Theology*. In what has become one of the most cited passages by both Christian and atheistic apologists, Paley compares living organisms to the mechanism of a watch, claiming that both suggest purposive design:

> In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer I had before given…. There must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed [the watch] for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use…. Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. (Paley)

"What Are Rocks For?": A Perfectly Legitimate Question

Human-made tools and artifacts often *are* created with a purpose in mind (that is, in the mind of the artificer). The same is not obviously true for natural objects, organisms or the Universe as a whole. But the attempt to understand organic "design," inanimate natural objects and even life itself in terms of teleology may be more than just a by-product of religious instruction or socialization. Some work in developmental psychology suggests that humans are cognitively inclined to detect purpose in things that seem, upon reflection, not to be the outcome of intended purpose or teleology. In other words, we humans engage in "promiscuous teleology" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 45). This is especially true of children. Many experiments in developmental psychology suggest that children prefer teleological explanations for natural objects and organisms, which adults would less frequently endorse (Kelemen; Kelemen and DeYanni). As humans develop into adulthood they begin to restrict teleological explanations in favor of more straightforwardly causal explanations. However, there is reason to believe that "we do not simply outgrow the tendency to see purpose in the world but have to learn to tamp it down through formal education, and even then, it comes sneaking out when we are not paying careful attention" (55).[64] Even scientifically trained adults "possess a bias to favor purpose-based explanations" (54).[65]

[64] See Kelemen and Rosset.

[65] "prior to a formal scientific education, children promiscuously attribute functions to all kinds of living and nonliving objects, viewing them as 'made for something'" (Kelemen, "Why Are Rocks Pointy?" 1448).

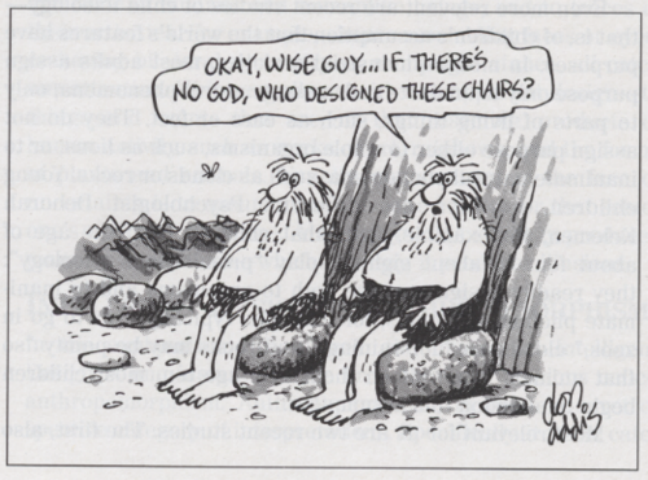

Fig. 3. Don Addis Cartoon (Maestro B).

Again, we can see that less *social* or *agentive* explanations of phenomena are more difficult for most humans to acquire, [66] whether in religious discourse (e.g., philosophical theology) or the sciences (e.g., evolution by natural selection).[67] And people tend to make sense of the causal processes in the world in social terms, that is, in terms of *agents*, who *have minds*, and act *for purposes*. This cognitive bias in humans makes Paley's argument from design particularly appealing, in that it is very intuitive for us to think about the natural world in terms of design and purpose.[68]

Deconversion and the Loss of God's Purposes

[66] Those diagnosed with Autism or Asberger's syndrome are thought to lack certain social cognitive tendencies, which makes understanding agentive or social explanations difficult for them. For this reason, they may have difficulty determining social expectations or conventions and navigating social situations and may, therefore, be more adept at understanding non-agentive or strictly causal explanations. Robert McCauley writes, "In sum, a subset of people of normal or above intelligence [those with autistic spectrum conditions] is simply not built to acquire or mentally maneuver with religion as effortlessly as everyone else is" (McCauley 262).

[67] Some psychological findings suggest that acquiring an understanding of natural selection as a strictly causal process is difficult and students often misunderstand it, sometimes believing that "individual animals acted in goal-directed ways to meet their needs and that, through their efforts, their bodies were genetically transformed to 'grow' or produce the functional part" (Kelemen, "Teleological Minds" 4).

[68] The social relevance of the debates regarding the teaching of evolution or creationism in public schools is understandable, given that an explanation of life in terms of mechanical natural processes is extremely counterintuitive and an explanation in terms of design is much more cognitively comfortable for people. "At a basic level, positing a designer for the design seems right" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 55).

The similarity between the experience of death and that of deconversion with regard to teleological thinking involves the loss of the perceived agency in one's social world. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the agency of God is perceived as going away through deconversion, just as the agency of another human is perceived as going away through the event of their death. Through both of these shifts, the agent ceases to be experienced as an active presence in the experiencer's environment. As the agent ceases to be experienced, so do the agent's *purposes.* Just as a dead person can no longer engage in actions *for reasons*,[69] neither can the dead God of the deconverted believer. The shift from born-again Christian theism to philosophical naturalism de-personalizes the world, at least to some extent. Natural events, human accidents, and coincidences can no longer be explained in terms of benevolent purposes, but must be understood by appealing to forces of cause-and-effect that are under no one's control. These non-anthropomorphic causes are, thus, indifferent to questions of human wellbeing or misfortune.

Two differences between the decrease in teleological thinking necessitated by deconversion and that necessitated by death must be acknowledged. First, deconversion retroactively undermines teleological explanations, while someone's death does not. For example, if one's parent dies, the parent's agency (and with it, their purposes) has vanished from the world. But, that doesn't entail a *reinterpretation* of all the events that the parent was thought to have affected or acted upon during their lifetime. It is only from their death forward that they are ineligible as an explanation for events, and their purposes are ineligible as explanations of the reasons for events. However,

[69] I set aside, here, the issue of belief in the ghosts or spirits of dead individuals. The shift in question is the shift to philosophical naturalism, which usually discounts all non-material agents.

reinterpretation of past events and experiences is exactly what is needed in the wake of deconversion.

Religious experiences in the deconvert's past must be reframed within her newly naturalistic worldview. Past experiences or occurrences that were previously attributed to God must be explained, either in terms that invoke only human agency and purposes or that do not invoke agency and purpose at all. Similarly, any event in the deconvert's life that was thought to have purpose, bestowed by God, is retroactively drained of divine purpose. At first consideration, it seems that the retroactive nature of deconversion would threaten the claim that the experience is similar to death. After all, no one has to reinterpret their entire past because their grandmother dies, but they do if God dies.

The retroactive nature of this reduction in teleological explanations does not undermine the analogy with death, however. This is because events that were initially experienced as teleological or purposeful will still be remembered that way. When recalling an event in which one initially invoked God's presence or purposes, one will also remember the initial conceptual interpretation of the event *as part of the event* and also the emotions or consequent thoughts that were relevant in light of that interpretation. For example, in philosopher Wayne Proudfoot's book *Religious Experience,* he provides this example of how our conceptual interpretation of an event serves, in part, to constitute the event itself:

> I may have been frightened by the bear that I saw up ahead on the trail. My friend points out to me that it is not a bear but a log, and my fear subsides. What did I really see up ahead? By one interpretation of the word *see,* I saw a bear. That is the way I apprehended it, and that

> apprehension accounts for my fear and behavioral response. (Proudfoot 217)

In this hypothetical case, when he remembers what happened, he will remember being afraid. He will remember *seeing* the bear. This is true even though he did not actually come into contact with a bear and even though his current (and revised) best explanation for what caused the experience involves a log, rather than a bear. The initial interpretation of an experience serves to determine one's emotion and "behavioral response" during the experience (217). These emotions and responses are foundational components of the experience, regardless of later reinterpretations that may make the emotions and responses seem irrational or irrelevant in light of new information. So, when born-again Christians "feel God's presence… hear God's voice… [and] their hearts flood with incandescent joy" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 223), the experience will have involved incandescent joy even if the Christian later deconverts and is forced to reinterpret the cause of their experience and the appropriateness of their emotional responses. In other words, just because experiences may have to be reinterpreted in light of a deconversion, the deconvert will still to some extent remember the experiences *as they were experienced*, not only as how they are currently interpreted.

The second difference that must be highlighted is that the scope of the teleological thinking affected by deconversion is much broader and, in many cases, more foundational to the person's view of the world. This is due to the fact that God's effect on the world, since God is thought to be the creator of the world, is much larger than the effect of any individual human being. Deconversion from theism, then, has the potential to affect more than one's relationship with God; it can potentially shift one's evaluation of the world as

a whole, possibly in a negative direction. This is especially true when interpreting or reinterpreting tragedy or suffering within a philosophically naturalistic framework. While understanding fortuitous happenings as the outcome of indifferent causal chains might pose no emotional difficulty, the same is not necessarily true for the understanding of tragic events and the fact of suffering in general.

God's Good Purposes and the Meaning of Tragedy

Clearly, attempts at explaining the purposes of natural objects and living organisms are not the only way that the concept of God is used to invoke the role of purpose. Understanding the purpose of tragedy is also an area of human inquiry that lends itself to explanations in terms of agency, namely God. "When something strikingly unfortunate happens to us, we and those close to us are prone to ask why" (Barrett, *Why Would Anyone* 54). Asking "why?" in the face of tragedy or misfortune is not a difficult impulse to empathize with, but asking "why" an unfortunate occurrence happened is ambiguous. On the one hand, an individual might be asking for a causal account of how the current circumstance came to be (e.g., what factors led to the appearance and growth of the cancer?) Alternatively, one might be inquiring as to what the *purpose* of the event was. *For what* did this happen? What did the event *represent* or *mean*? Often, humans are inquiring as to the latter, and this form of the question "why?" has teleological thinking built into it. If an event happened for some purpose, forethought must be involved.

Some*one* intended something with this negative event. God, in these cases, is a prime candidate.

"The ability to see events as symbolically communicating something appears to be a psychological achievement arising in childhood" (Barrett, *Born Believers* 52). Humans' preference for agentive or socially relevant explanations explains this tendency.[70] Understanding tragedy and misfortune in terms of purpose does not necessarily discount or replace a causal understanding, but causal explanations usually have less direct import to the *particular* social circumstance at hand.

> People who [propose teleological explanations] know perfectly well that disease strikes *most* people at some point… But general principles are just that – *general*... They have nothing to say about particular cases… Hence the value of supernatural explanations, which are relevant to the particulars of the situation. (Boyer 197)

Understanding events, especially tragedies and misfortunes, in terms of God's intentions and purposes not only provides meaning, and therefore narrative or structural coherence,[71] but God's intentions are thought to be ultimately benevolent as well. Born-again Christians, then, invoke (and experience) an anthropomorphic God who bestows *good* purposes onto their misfortune and tragedy. When things in life go bad, they do so in service of the ultimately good purposes of God, even if we humans can't understand how this is so. The mega-church pastor and best-selling Christian author Rick Warren

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[70] For a thorough discussion of the role of agentive explanations and social inferences in understanding misfortune, see Boyer 195-202.

[71] "Agents' intentional states and actions are the threads that stitch episodes together both in narrative lines and in human memory. From those intentional states and actions that our theory of mind serves up, we weave the patterns in the fabric that constitutes our social and personal worlds and many peoples' understandings of their physical surroundings as well" (McCauley 185).

exemplifies this belief in the ultimate goodness and *foreseen* purpose of human life and misfortune in his book *The Purpose Driven Life.* In the book, Warren invokes the mental states of God to justify the meaning of human life, writing:

> You are not an accident.
>
> Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. In fact, he expected it.
>
> Long before you were conceived by your parents, you were conceived in the mind of God. (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* 22)

The born-again Christian belief that ultimately the events in life happen for good purposes (i.e., the purposes of God) is not only espoused by best-selling mega-church pastors, but is also adhered to by Christian laity to soften the blows of the unpredictability and pain of life. Tanya Luhrmann claims that God belief may be "more about managing pain than explaining it" (*When God Talks Back* 295). But, the explanation of pain and suffering in the born-again Christian context is a necessary factor in how practitioners manage them. In other words, the belief that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28) only makes sense if God is actually *believed* to work in all things, including seemingly pointless pain and misfortune. "[Born-again Christians] want a sense of purpose; they want to know that what they do is not meaningless; they want trust and love and resilience when things go badly" (*When God Talks Back* 295).

The philosopher Owen Flanagan discusses the desire for transcendent purpose or meaning in his work *The Problem of the Soul.* Flanagan nicely articulates the philosophical naturalist position that neither God nor any other transcendent mean-er

bestows meaning onto life and the world. He writes, "even though no one knows what ultimate or transcendent meaning would be if there was such a thing, we like whatever it is these words and images gesture toward. It seems comforting" (Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul* 12). No doubt part of the reason transcendent purpose and meaning are comforting is because, especially in light of the belief in a benevolent God, unfortunate events are thought to happen for ultimately good reasons. Tragedies don't necessarily represent a pointless, chaotic and pitiless cosmos, but only painful means to God's good ends.

In Altemeyer and Hunsberger's study of religious converts, one believer discussed the role his God belief played in how he experienced his father's death, saying:

> It brought a lot of questions to my mind and I think it kind of made me wobble a bit on where I stand in my faith. It was the hardest time because questions that I may have asked myself would be like, why would somebody like my father have to die at a young age? Whereas other people have fathers who beat them or who beat their wives and they are still alive. I would ask God these questions, in the end knowing that he has reasons for everything and that I can't try and figure him out. (*Amazing Conversions* 181)

For this believer as well as many others, the function of God belief is "not about explaining reality but about transforming it: making it possible to trust that the world is good, despite ample evidence to the contrary, and to hope, despite loneliness and despair" (Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* 295).

In today's cultural discussions regarding religion, proponents of atheism are right to point out that philosophical naturalism undermines most (if not all) of the conceptual motivations for religiously-inspired divisiveness, hatred, and violence. However, it often goes unacknowledged that deconversion from theism also undermines the foundation for the belief in the inherent goodness of the world. Philosophical naturalism doesn't replace a view of the world as inherently positive with a view of the world as inherently negative, rather it denies inherent value to the world. The Universe is simply indifferent to human life and purposes. Having completed the argument in favor of the analogy between deconversion and death, I will conclude with a brief discussion of the broader social relevance of this work. Where does the analogy I've outlined fit within the broader public discussions between the religious and the non-religious or more specifically, between Christians and atheists? What impact should understanding the emotional contours of the deconversion process have on the atheist and humanist movement?

Chapter VII: Where Do We Go From Here? – Killing God with Kindness

...militant, uncompromising antitheism inhibits people who do not believe in God from ever moving beyond articulating how they differ from the religious into the kinds of efforts that engender community building within and cooperation without.
– Chris Stedman, atheist and interfaith leader

God may be dead, but the urgent issues which impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away when we have been nudged to perceive some scientific inaccuracies in the tale of the seven loaves and fishes.
– Alain de Botton, philosophical essayist

Higher questions of meaning and purpose are not important.
Human life is no more noble than that of a cockroach.
– Scientist quoted in *Science vs. Religion,* Ecklund

In an op-ed piece for the Catholic Herald online entitled "The Tragedy at the Heart of New Atheism," Friar Alexander Lucie-Smith offers a critique of the New Atheism movement that is not based primarily on the claim that his Christian theism is

factually true.[72] Instead, Lucie-Smith claims that the New Atheism views the world as ultimately tragic rather than comedic and that this is a problem. He provides a quote by Richard Dawkins that enunciates this view: "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference" (qtd. in Lucie-Smith).

Lucie-Smith then goes on to claim that this statement is less a statement of science and more "an existential statement of belief about the nature of the universe" (Lucie-Smith). The Friar's problem with atheism, in this case, is what he thinks are its *evaluative* consequences. He believes atheism necessitates a negative evaluation of the world in general and he sees this as tragic. Lucie-Smith is not articulating a concern about the fact that Dawkins conceptually *believes* the world is without inherent purpose, but that atheists "*feel* that life teaches them that there is no purpose to anything, only blind, pitiless indifference" (Lucie-Smith, emphasis mine).

This critique of atheistic thought, then, is based on atheism's potential to engender certain emotional outcomes or dispositions, rather than its truth-value. Critiques such as this one cannot be met with only appeals to scientific findings and the exposure of inconsistencies in popular theological formations. Those in the atheist movement in the U.S. (the loudest voices at least) have not adequately addressed or sensitively handled the legitimate concerns regarding the potentially negative emotional consequences of adjusting to a purposeless and "pitiless" universe.[73]

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[72] Lucie-Smith, however, is a Catholic theist and his theistic beliefs can be seen in how he delivers his critique.

[73] It should be noted, in the name of fairness, that the critiques of the emotional effects of atheism are often hopelessly tangled up with non-scientific speculation and doctrinal religious claims about the inadequacy of a naturalistic worldview. For example, Lucie-Smith writes, "[Dawkins] is clearly in the camp of an earlier professor, Friedrich Nietzsche. This is a serious matter, because the Nietzschean vision is one that not

In light of the understanding that the experience of deconversion is analogous to the experience of the death of another person in the specific ways I've discussed, the approach taken by those espousing an atheistic worldview deserves attention. Specifically, those endorsing and promoting the atheist/humanist/rationalist movement(s) should be compassionate rather than rhetorically antagonistic toward the religious.[74] Atheists and humanists should take seriously the potential difficulty of experiencing the loss of a *psychologically real* God-relationship, as well as the loss of transcendent meaning and purpose necessitated by that experience.

Some religiously inclined thinkers claim that (questions of truth-value aside) the loss of theistic types of religiosity necessarily will cause more harm than good in emotional, psychological and social terms (D'Souza; Driscoll 101-102). I would not go so far. Rather, I claim that the implications of deconversion for one's view of the world are a complex and important issue that can't be easily categorized in terms as simple as "harmful" or "helpful." The analogy with death highlights this complexity in that deconverting individuals may experience either grief or liberation, depending on their previously held conception of God.[75]

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only contradicts the idea of Divine Providence, but it also makes science of any sort nonsensical, in that it seems to deny intrinsic meaning to physical phenomena, attributing meaning only to human will" (Lucie-Smith).

[74] This suggestion is meant to reference religious moderates (i.e., *most* religious people). Fierce and uncompromising denouncements of religious extremists who employ violence, threats of violence, or intolerance are almost always appropriate.

[75] For an in-depth discussion of the question of the harm that irreligion could cause, see Dennett, *Breaking The Spell* 203.

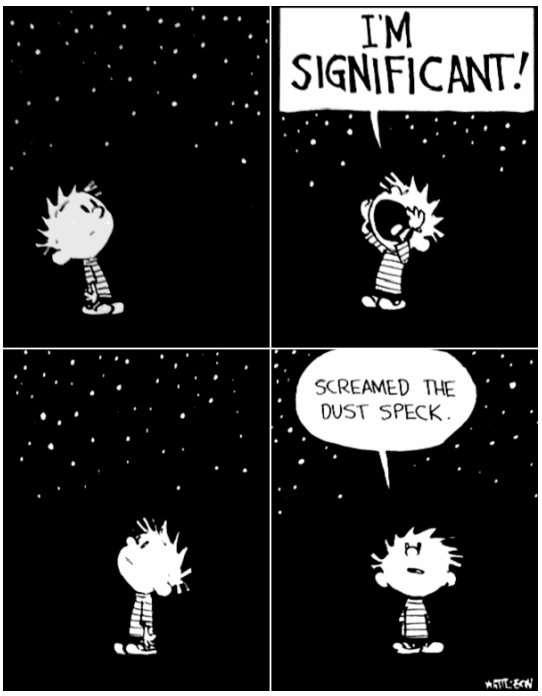

Fig. 4. Calvin and Hobbes Cartoon (Watterson 30).

Although not inspired specifically by the analogy between deconversion and death, some atheistic commentators have begun to realize that the denouncement of theism should be thought of as the *beginning* of articulating an atheistic worldview, rather than the end. Philosophical essayist Alain de Botton, in his divisive book *Religion For Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, writes, "the real issue is not whether God exists or not, but where to take the argument once one decides that he evidently doesn't" (11). De Botton goes on to articulate his own reimagining of the place of ritual, aesthetics, moral teamwork, community building, and engagement with the awe-inspiring aspects of life in a society that has rejected the supernatural tenets of religion, such as theism.

While de Botton does not address the deconversion process directly, he recognizes that a rejection of theism is a complex matter and not without its own challenges. For example, he writes, "The signal danger of life in a godless society is that

it lacks the reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and eventual annihilation. When God is dead, human beings – much to their detriment – are at risk of taking psychological center stage" (de Botton 200). De Botton's recognition that religion and transcendence can and should have a place in a post-theistic world has drawn critics from both atheistic and religious circles. He writes that, through his work, he seeks to "burn off religions' more dogmatic aspects in order to distil a few aspects of them that would prove timely and consoling to skeptical contemporary minds facing the crises and griefs of finite existence on a troubled planet" (19).

Chris Stedman is another example of an atheist thinker who conveys a less abrasive and more humanistic philosophical naturalism. "His atheism doesn't hate God; it loves people" (Patel, xii). Stedman, in his book *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious,* writes about the distinctive role that atheists can play in conducting interreligious dialogue and encouraging productive social action. Stedman himself experienced the deconversion process, from evangelical Christian to non-religious atheist.[76] His experience mirrors many of the aspects of deconversion that I have discussed in this work, and his description of the experience bears quoting at length:

> I wanted to believe in God. I wanted to love Jesus and participate in his fellowship of believers. I looked to many Christians as pillars of goodness, and I wanted to emulate their compassion and social justice ethic… I earnestly believed that, to be like them, I needed to believe in their God. It seemed to be a package deal, but I was much more invested in the

[76] Stedman distinguishes between "religious nontheists or non-religious nontheists.." Examples could be SBNR (spiritual but not religious) individuals or more traditionally religious individuals, such as Buddhists, who don't hold theistic beliefs. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktphhmd1eQI

> positive, human-affirming ethics and the community aspect of it than I was in the theism…. It was kind of heartbreaking, then, when I realized that I no longer believed in God... It was as if I had come home from an especially long week at work to find out that God had packed up His things and moved out days before without leaving a forwarding address, and I'd just been too busy to notice His absence…. Letting go of God was difficult. Even as I began to step up my antireligious rhetoric in college, I privately mourned God. I wanted to believe and was disappointed in my inability to do so. I missed Him – and the community and ethical commitments that came along with Him. (Stedman 83, 85)

Stedman's description of his deconversion highlights many of the emotional shifts that can make the deconversion experience difficult.

As I have discussed, deconversion from theism is in many ways potentially similar to the experience of the death of another human being. Given that this is the case, and given the potential personal, social, and political impact that such a shift can have, there is a need for sensitivity, understanding, and respect between religious and non-religious individuals and groups. The atheistic thinkers that I have explored above exemplify an approach to the topic of religion (and theism, more specifically) that seeks constructive rhetoric and action. Rather than simply articulating the difference in metaphysical beliefs between Christians and atheists in the name of increasing adherents, this approach attempts to create understanding and affirmation even in the presence of disagreement.

Socially divisive or scientifically untenable religious rhetoric need not go

uncontested by the atheist and secularist communities. But the one-sided representation of deconversion from theism as always wholly liberating or positive, ignores certain emotionally difficult aspects of the deconversion process. The non-religious should recognize and acknowledge the potential experience of loss (of orienting and hopeful beliefs) that is the deconversion process and tailor their polemics and "evangelism" tactics accordingly. The atheist movement should, therefore, highlight the adoption of a compassionate and humanistic worldview, rather than simply articulating their distaste for religion or theism. It is my hope that the analogy of deconversion as similar to death can aid in the process of humanizing religious individuals and their theological commitments for those who adhere to a philosophically naturalistic worldview.

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